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CHILLAGOE CHARLIE

By ROBERT M.
MACDONALD

WILLIAM HALE HARKNESS.
12 E. 53D ST.,
NEW YORK CITY, N. Y.



CHILLAGOE CHARLIE



"HE NEVER SAID A WORD, BUT HIS HANDS WERE CRAMMED
FULL OF REVOLVERS." (See page 112.)

Frontispiece.

CHILLAGOE CHARIOT

BY

ROBERT M. MACDONALD

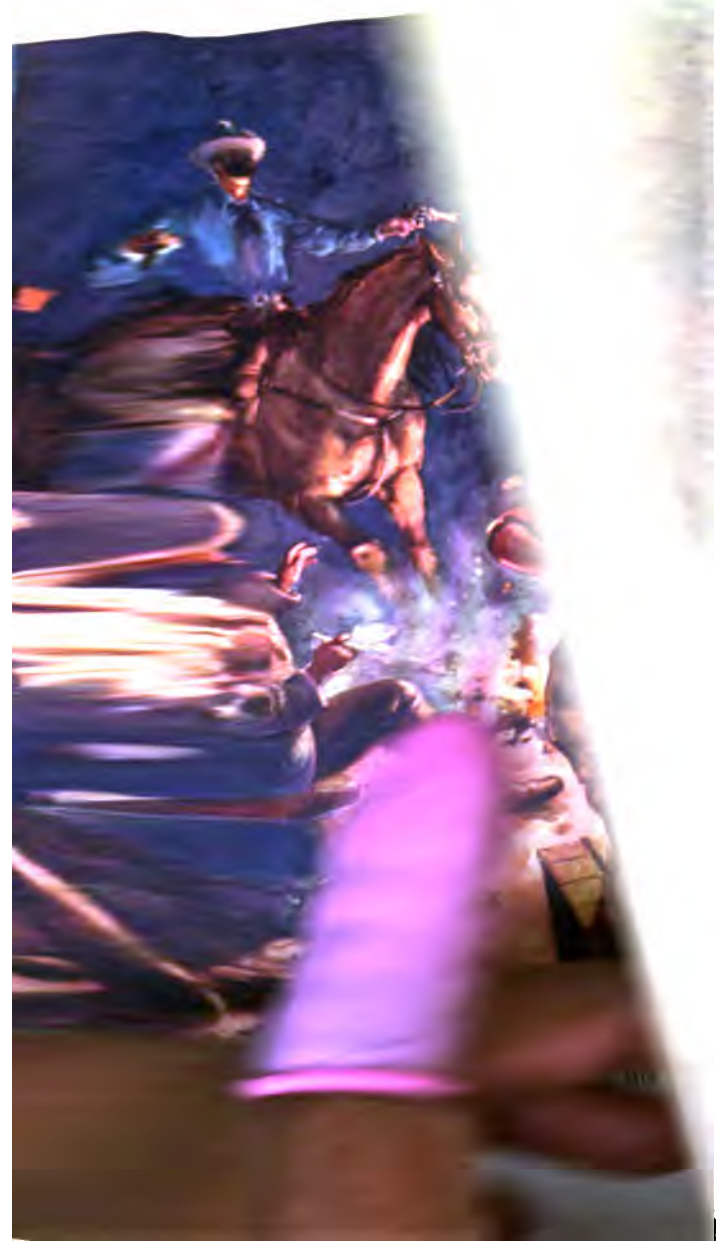
AUTHOR OF "THE SECRET OF THE S. GANSON"

WITH 17 ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARCH V. LEE

B. L. LYNCH

NEW YORK

1924



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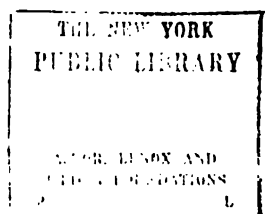
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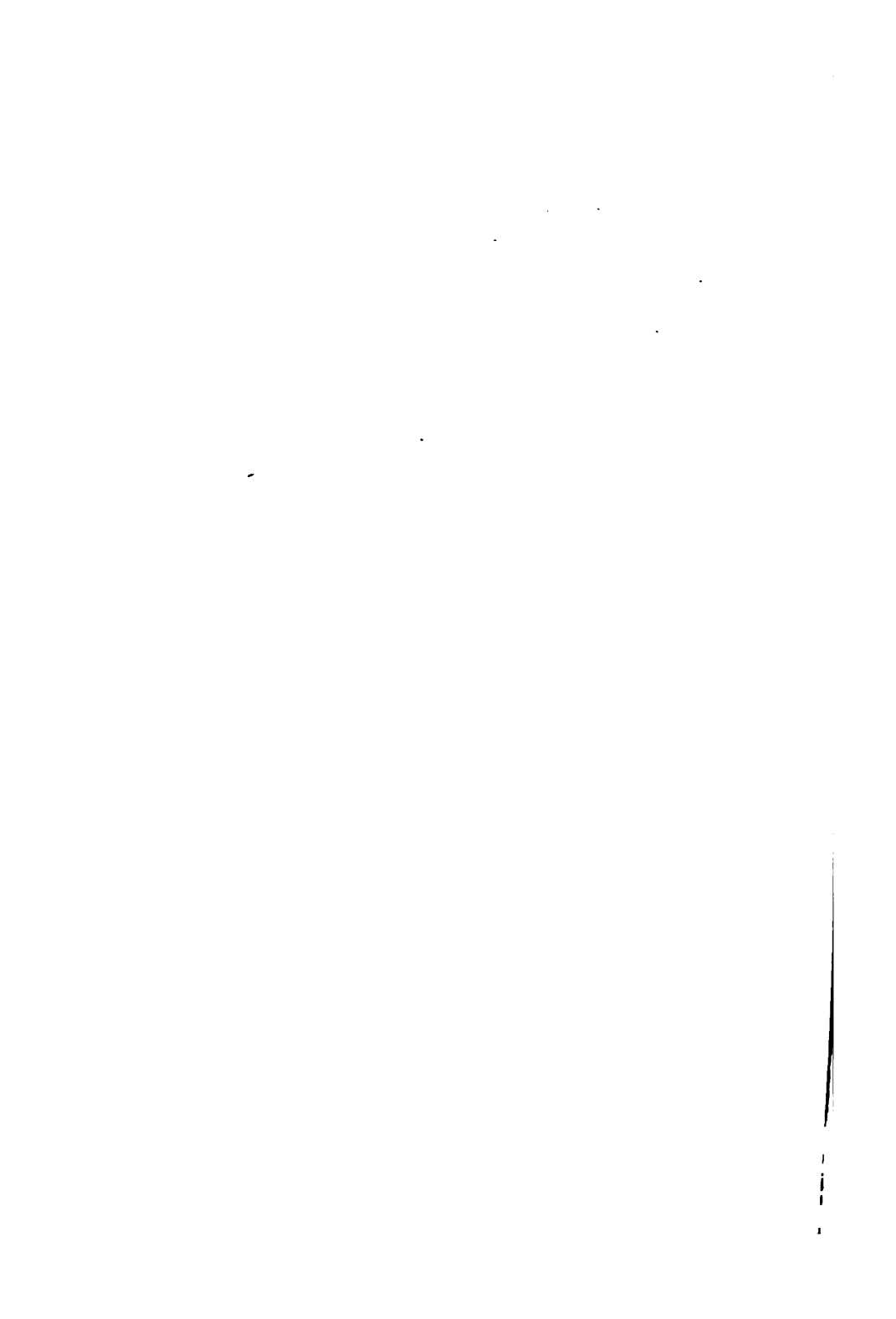
1909



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CHILLAGOE CHARLIE

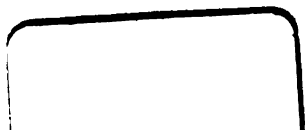
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THE FIGHTING PARSON

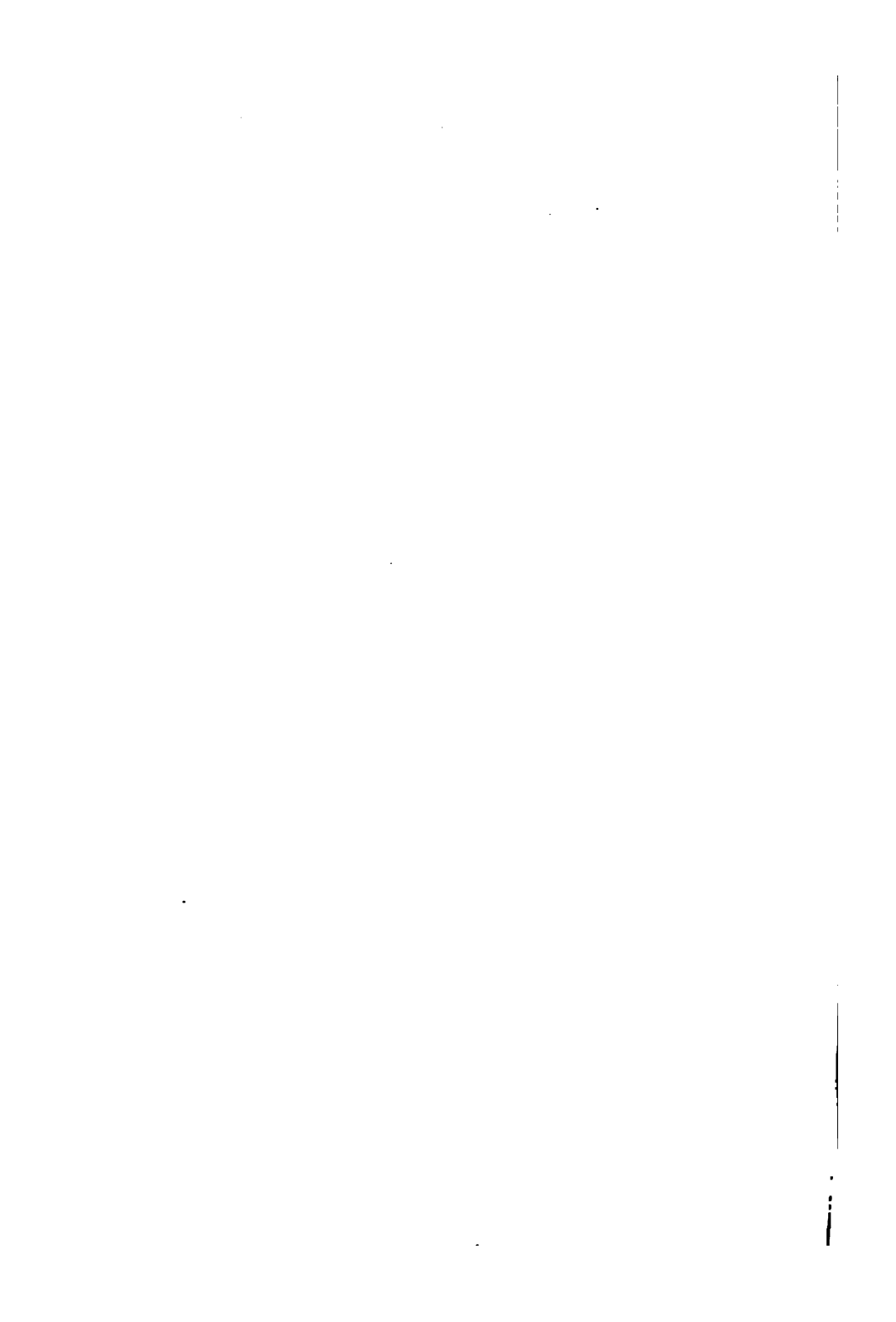
" I T'S a bit hot, Nigger, isn't it ? "

Nigger made no audible reply—his throat was too dry—but he wagged his tail cheerily. He was a dog of no particular family whose entire interest in life was centred in his master's doings, and in chasing, catching, and killing all the iguanas and snakes which crossed the blistering path in front of them. And it was hot. A tropical sun straight overhead poured down its merciless rays, turning the soft soil of the country into what more closely resembled hot ash from a furnace. The shimmering lime bluffs, too, which, rising to a height of about four hundred feet, dotted the land like mighty sentinels, flung back the heat from their roasted sides like the walls of a great oven, or the concave faces of a series of gigantic burning mirrors. The country was baked, and burnt, and actually cracking with the heat ; it was parching for water which would not come until the annual thunderstorms worked their way over the ranges from the coast about Christmas-time. And it was yet but

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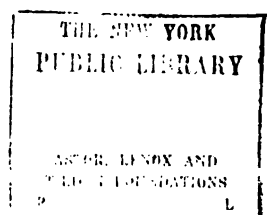
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known everywhere in the Gulf country as the Fighting Parson, I don't know why ; but, known only by that name, I have access to all the mining camps, whereas many of my zealous brethren who do not understand the Gulf men get a bad time if they intrude. Parsons, as a rule, you know, are not welcomed in these parts, and as for Sunday, it never comes up the line further than Chillagoe—— But the billy is boiling, we'll dine—— What's the matter, Nigger ?”

Nigger was again noisily advertising the approach of some one, and on Tom looking through the trees he saw two riders canter into the timber clump.

“It's two troopers,” he said, “and they are coming in here to water their horses.”

“Troopers !” exclaimed the parson, springing up. “What are they wanting out this way, I wonder ?” He walked over to the buggy and stood there until the men dismounted.

“Good-day,” they cried affably ; “we've struck you in good time, it seems.”

“Couldn't improve on the time by a minute,” answered the parson. “Hitch up your quadrupeds and sail right in to the best we have—cold goat's flesh, pickles, damper, and tea. I suppose you are out after the gentleman mentioned on this notice-board ?”

“Chillagoe Charlie ? Oh, we can put the hobbles on him any time we want,” laughed one ; “but we would be real green hands to do that now. You see, sir, we are special duty men, and while we are running him down we get extra pay.”

“I understand,” said the parson, laughing ; “and if you killed the goose with the golden eggs, or, in other words, captured Chillagoe Charlie, that extra pay attached to your special duty would stop.”

"Right on the nail, boss; so we are not in any special hurry to catch Charlie. We're going out to the camps just now to see if all the income-tax papers have been filled in correctly. Those miners are making cartloads of money and it is only fair that they should be made to pay something towards Government expenses."

"Surely; but when will you take up the chase of Chillagoe Charlie in earnest?"

"We're on his track now. If he can't keep out of our hands we'll have to collar him, and I expect to hear from Brisbane at any time that if we don't produce him in Cairns within so many hours, we'll be side-tracked. Of course until then Charlie is safe from us, if he doesn't play the fool. By the way, I wonder who has been cutting out the words in this proclamation about him? I didn't know he had any friends."

"Oh, I think he has a good number. But sit down on that log and let us sample this tea. They say that these lime springs make excellent tea."

"Thanks. If you ever strike any of our fellows on the trail, don't be slow in chiming in. We all know the Fighting Parson, and there will always be a billy of tea ready for him. Have you heard anything about the new rush out Crocodile Crossing way?"

"A little. I passed that way recently, and saw the prospectors working, but all the information I have was gleaned in Murgoona to-day. There was copper found, I believe?"

"Yes, over 20 per cent. stuff too. Micky Keegan struck it, and every man between here and the coast who can raise the price of flour for a damper is on the move for the place."

"I think we might put in a week there, sergeant,"

spoke the second trooper ; " Charlie is almost sure to come down when he hears of the rush."

" No, that means we should keep away. We might catch him," replied the sergeant. " We'll camp here until to-morrow, it's getting on in the afternoon anyway, and then go on to Caledonia Camp ; they keep good tucker there, and we'll hear all the latest news from the boys."

" Very well, gentlemen," said the parson ; " we are going to Caledonia Camp now ; I shall tell the boys you are coming along to-morrow. We'll say goodbye here though, for I may not be there when you come ; I am going round all the camps just now, and my time is limited."

" Aren't you afraid of falling in with Chillagoe Charlie ?" asked the younger trooper. " People say he doesn't pull with parsons at all."

" I am not afraid of him," responded the parson ; " I am sure he is not so black as he is painted."

" Have you ever met him, sir ?" asked the sergeant, as they finished tea and began to pack up the utensils.

" No, I can't say that I have ever actually met him," answered the parson, " but I happen to know him, nevertheless."

" Then tell him to clear out farther west, or north, when you do meet him, or, rather, tell his friends to give him the tip, when you meet them. We must do our duty, you know, however unpleasant——"

" I understand," interrupted the parson. " When the special pay ceases you must remember you are paid by the Government to do certain work, and you'll do it, no matter what happens. If what I have heard of Chillagoe Charlie is right though, I do not think you need fear that he will fall into your hands."

They say he is wonderfully clever at disguising himself."

"And that's a fact. Why, the man actually camped with the local police one night in Murgoona. He passed himself off as a stranded actor whose company had bursted up in Chillagoe, and kept the boys splitting their sides with his yarns. In the morning, too, they called on some of the leading miners and made a kind of collection for him, to finance him until he struck better days, and the sergeant in charge gave him a pass down the line to Cairns."

"But how did the police discover who their guest was?" asked Tom, feeding Nigger with the remnants of their lunch.

"They didn't, until he wrote a letter from somewhere thanking them for their hospitality, and stuck his handle at the bottom of it."

"Might not that have been done by some one else as a joke?" continued Tom.

"No fear; I don't reckon there is a man in North Queensland who would risk signing himself Chillagoe Charlie for all the copper between here and the Palmer River."

"Well, it is time we were moving, gentlemen," observed the parson; "I wonder what you would say if I told you I was Chillagoe Charlie? Come, Tom, you are coming with me——"

"We should say you were intending to stand for Parliament next election and were practising," laughed the sergeant.

"Sort of changing from a minister of the Church into one of the State," added the junior; "George Washington and Ananias couldn't hold a candle to our M.P.'s. Give our love to Charlie all the same and say we hope to meet him some time soon—that is, if you happen to come across him."

"I'll deliver your message by some means," laughed the parson; "but what if he thinks you mean what you say, and comes to see you?"

"I reckon he'll find us at home when he calls," said the sergeant; "but that can't be soon, for a message came only this morning from O. K. township saying he was seen up there; that's why we are coming out this way instead of going north that way."

"Ah, well, boys, we'll get on the track again. We want to get into Caledonia Camp before the afternoon shift goes out to work. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, sir; goodbye, lad," cried the men. "We'll come along to-morrow and listen to your sermon if you're there."

The parson climbed into the buggy. "Come on, Tom," he said, "you're coming with me. Lift Nigger inside, he'll burn his paws running alongside on the hot sand."

"I am very grateful to you, sir, for your offer to drive me to the camp, but it would be taking too great advantage of your kindness were I to accept," answered Tom; "Nigger and I will walk on slowly ourselves."

"Hear the kid," muttered the troopers; "he thinks he is still down South."

"Get up beside me," said the parson; "there is not a man in North Queensland but who would do all that I am doing for you, and why, therefore, should not I do any little thing I can to make things easier for you?"

"Get on board, boy," said the sergeant; "even Chillagoe Charlie would give you a lift if he were going in your direction."

Tom made no further objection. He climbed up beside the parson, and Nigger found a cool spot

behind some boxes in the body of the buggy, and soon they were out in the broiling sun again.

But the horses were fresh, and well used to pulling through the sands in the North Queensland back-blocks. A dwarfed form of scrub now flanked the track, and noisy members of the parrot family flitted among the shadeless branches. An occasional kangaroo, too, hopped along the roadway beside them, and in the far distance a mob of horses could be seen endeavouring to find something to eat amidst the sparse vegetation that existed in the scrub.

"This is surely a better country we are coming into," Tom ventured, after they had travelled a mile in silence; "the scrub seems getting larger, and the bird life is more plentiful."

"Yes; we've left the limestone belt behind us now, and are in settled country. That line of bluffs we crossed back at the spring extends in a line as straight as could be laid out with a theodolite for hundreds of miles north-west and south-east. Has that fact any significance to you?"

"I am afraid not, sir; I am not very strong on geology."

"Then I will tell you something which I hope you will keep in mind should you ever go out prospecting for minerals on your own account. That line of bluffs marks the point of contact between two different countries, and where any change in country occurs near limestone there you may look for minerals.—Am I boring you?"

"Oh, no, sir; I want all the knowledge I can get; please go on."

"Well, you know all North Queensland was once volcanic, and the crust of the earth is broken up by innumerable cracks and fissures. Now, without say-

ing anything about either of the two theories which different schools advance to account for the existence of fissure lodes—one set says they were filled with their mineral contents from the surface, and the other asserts that they could only be filled from below—it is fairly well proved that these cracks filled with water somehow, which carried away in solution the various minerals which were solvent that it encountered. These waters carried their copper, silver, lead, and other minerals until they met limestone formations, and there chemical action was set up by the action of carbonic acid gas on the solutions, resulting in the throwing down of the mineral contents. Now, do you see what I mean when I tell you to always examine the country carefully near limestone formations?”

“I do, sir ; and the knowledge, slight as it is, which I have of chemistry makes me understand fully what you have said about the ore-deposition of minerals by the action of carbonic acid gas. I shall remember your words if ever I go prospecting, and I thank you for the hint.”

“You are going prospecting, my lad, and that soon ; it is in your blood, and you can no more resist the call of the silent untrodden bush than could your uncle——”

“My uncle ? Did you know him ?” Tom almost jumped from his seat in his excitement.

“I was speaking of a type, my lad ; you told me your uncle was an explorer. It so happens, however”—the parson’s voice had changed suddenly—“that I did know a man bearing the same name as you. That was long ago. He belonged to that famous Legion that never was listed. You will find his name treasured among those hardy pioneers who first pushed through to the great land of the

West. He was one of them ; but do you remember him ? ”

“ No, sir ; I was too young when he left home ; but I have often heard my mother say that he was one of the best men who ever lived, and, despite all that people have said of him, I want to find him and tell him that I don’t believe he ever did what they said——”

“ He didn’t, boy. Whatever your uncle may be now—if he is alive—he lived a straight life as long—— But dear me, I am perhaps talking of another person altogether. We’ll change the subject, Tom ; for his name I am going to take you in charge, whether he was your uncle or not. I have great influence in this country, and I will put you in a way to carve out your fortune, honestly, and as a true Briton.”

“ Thank you, sir ; but I am afraid that I cannot put my mind to fortune-making now. You have fired me with the idea of finding my uncle, and I will go on wandering until I have left my footprints all over this great land. You said he went out West, sir ? Did you mean the Gulf ? ”

“ No, I referred to Western Australia. He crossed to the northern goldfields of that territory by an over-land route—the first to do so.”

“ Then I will do the same. Nigger and I will just keep going until we get there——”

“ It’s thousands of miles. Nature is not kind to those who dare her solitudes. Fierce native tribes bar the way. Death from fever, and horrible wasting diseases, lurks all along the track, and it is now well marked with the bleached bones of many who have tried the journey.”

“ I don’t care ; it doesn’t matter to any one whether I die or not, and I am going——”

"Boy, you are not. There have been enough victims of that overland track. Life is full of promise for you. Those who cross that desolate waste never return—at least——" He stopped abruptly, and then continued in an altered voice, "Tom, life is very strenuous up here. Men dare death every day and think little of it. Men, too, for many reasons often drop their name, or assume another—no one knows my name, for instance, and yet I preach the gospel wherever I go. Perhaps your uncle came back to this side ; perhaps, under some other name, he is still pioneering in this, the great, the fascinating Gulf country."

"You talk strangely, sir. How can a sand waste like this be fascinating?"

"The Gulf country is not all like this. This part is the bed of an ancient sea, or lake ; but out beyond the Walsh River stretches a mountain chain that belched forth fire from its towering peaks before Babylon saw light. My boy, Australia is both the oldest and the newest land tract on the surface of old Mother Earth. It is more than probable that the fleets of an ancient Oriental civilisation sailed over what is now the great continent of the South, but while they did so the flaming summits of many islands lit their course. The sea has now drained off, because of the gradual upheaval of its bed, and the island mountains have long since lost their internal fires. They are now a series of more or less connected ridges in a sea of sand which in places has been silted up by the fierce desert tornadoes until it has become difficult to tell where the original country once existed. What I have said applies to the desolate heart of Australia ; but up here we are on the fringe of the ancient Austral sea, in a land that, with New Guinea, Borneo, and the

islands of the Malaysian Archipelago, formed a continent larger by far than Europe. Here was the scene of Nature's wildest convulsions. When the land now forming Central Australia rose from the waste of tumultuous waters, it cast back the sea to the north and to the south in monstrous waves that must have overtopped the highest points of the previously existing land. These floods poured down the craters of the great volcanic chain which forms the backbone of this peninsula, and then ensued a battle such as the mind of man cannot conceive. Fiercely strove the fire and water for the possession of the earth's heart, but Providence is all wise, and in the Great Architect's plan of things this present land of the South had to be born and shaped out of the battle. Thus, the internal fires turned the water into steam, which, ever expanding, and finding no egress because of the tremendous volumes of water which filled the flue, grew terrific in its pent-up force, and finally burst asunder the walls which contained it, and shattered the ranges into fragments. Then were formed all the ground cracks and fissure lodes; then were thrown high those grim ironstone peaks you can see scattered around on every hand; and then was this country wrenched apart from its parent, and a new home for Britannia's sons formed. Australia had risen, and the waters which it had rolled back filled the great gulfs blown out of the earlier land, separating it into thousands of islands, of which the chief are New Guinea, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Celebes, and the Moluccas. Thus you can understand that we are now entering a country which, although an integral part of Australia, has more in common with the islands mentioned. It is a land in which Nature has laid her treasures on top, and where copper, silver, gold, and many other minerals exist side by side, and

sometimes even form part of the same lode. Soon you will know this land as an open book, and perhaps be able to clear away a little more of the mist which enshrouds its past—as your uncle tried to do.”

The parson ceased talking and gave his attention to the horses, and Tom remained deep in thought. At last he spoke : “ Was my uncle really a man like—like—I mean could he talk as you do ? ”

“ The Tom Willoughby I knew was considered the greatest authority on the geological formations of these parts in Australia. It is his words, so far as my memory carries me, that I have been giving to you.”

“ And you think there is a chance of his still being somewhere in North Queensland.”

“ I do ; he loved it, and if he is ever found, it will be somewhere between here and Cape York, at the north end of the Peninsula.”

“ Oh, if my uncle was a man anything like you, I would give half my life to be with him.”

“ He is like me—in fact, at times people have thought—— But there is Caledonia Camp over on the right. We’ve been travelling faster than I was aware. We’ll get off and brush ourselves free of sand and dust so as to be as presentable as possible.”

The parson dropped the reins and the horses at once stopped, and the two jumped down on the track, where Nigger promptly joined them. Half hidden among some pandanas palm-trees were dotted a number of tents which in the afternoon sun shone out dazzlingly white. There seemed to be about a score of them of various sizes all covered with a shade made of branches, and a large dump of mullock glittering in the intense sunlight indicated the presence of one of the mines.

The parson put on his coat and substituted a more

orthodox hat for his helmet, and then intimated that he was ready to proceed. "The manager here is a great friend of mine," he said, "as are also most of the men. It so happens, however, that there is one shift of miners I have never met—there are three shifts of eight hours each, you know, on the mines—and we may perhaps strike them."

"And if we do?" inquired Tom, wondering vaguely what sort of position he should take up among the miners into whose midst he was to be thus so abruptly brought.

"Oh, I suppose we'll just have to introduce ourselves. As a rule the men don't like parsons, because those appointed by the society for whom I work are not always suited for work in mining camps; but don't you mind, I can handle them all right."

They resumed their journey, and followed a bush track, which left the main one, until they broke out into the clearing in the middle of which stood the camp. No signs of life were visible, but as they drew up a couple of dogs awoke from a pleasant sleep in the shade of one of the tents and came out to investigate. Then Nigger saw them, and the silence of the camp was rudely broken by the sounds of warfare. Tom sprang to pull Nigger clear of the fray, and as he did so men suddenly appeared at the doors of several tents and blinked lazily at the intruders.

"Say there," cried one, "what does ye mean kicking up such a racket at this time of day? We've got to go on duty at four o'clock, an' it aint fair kicking us up at three."

"It's a parson, mates," cried another. "Maybe he's come to tell us how we won't feel the heat if we are good an' go to Sunday School——"

"Where is the manager, boys?" called out the

object of their remarks cheerily, after greeting all with the usual greeting of the bush, "Good-day, mates."

"He's up at the No. 3 shaft an' won't be back until he sees our shift started at four o'clock," answered one of the men.

"Ah, well, we can wait till he comes," continued the parson, beginning to unharness the horses. "Can any of you boys tell us where we can get water for our animals?"

"Hold hard, parson," shouted a man; "ye needn't get ready to camp here; you'll find water in the vertical shaft of that mine over there, if ye like to haul it for yourself, but anyhow I reckon ye'd better git on the move again, for we aint soft soap on parsons in this camp. Are we, mates?" The man turned to his comrades, who had now gathered round.

"Not much," they responded as one man.

"Parsons aint no good except among women folk. They tell them ghost stories of lands where there aren't anything to do but squat in the shade beside a water-bag all day, and twang at a golden harp," supplemented another, a rough-looking fellow of most powerful build.

"Best get started on the track again, parson," said some one; "there is a camp of Sunday-school people at Moldiva Creek."

"I see you men don't know me," observed the parson, coolly, setting the horses free. "I am not anxious to meet Sunday-school people; it is the untamed sons of the wild I wish to see, and although I did not intend holding services until Sunday, I now perceive that it is my duty to address you right here, for never a set of men more needing a civilising influence among them have I met.—Hold these horses, Tom."

"Blow ye for a psalm-singin' monkey-faced parrot," cried the powerfully built man. "Has ye the blamed cheek to tell us to our faces that we is uncivilised?"

"You certainly are, or you would attend to the first laws of bush hospitality——"

"Which doesn't count with fat, sleeky parsons, who——"

"And as I am neither fat nor sleeky your remarks are out of place, Jim Smith; I know you by reputation; you are the bully of this camp, as you have been of every camp in which you were employed——"

"What does ye say?" gasped the astonished man. "I'll hammer the life outen ye, ye glory-pro prospector, ye——ye——"

"That will do, Smith; don't use language which those cockatoos in that tree up there might carry into respectable camps. You are full of surplus energy I see, and as I suppose you will soon be picking a quarrel with some of your comrades to get rid of it, I here invite you to step out and hammer me to your heart's content."

"Boys, the parson is game," cried a man. "Let's be decent to him."

"Ye can be what ye like to him when I have done with him," growled Jim Smith savagely; "an' I reckon a stretcher is about the best thing you could get for him."

He advanced towards the parson threateningly, and the others gathered round.

CHAPTER II

THE MEN OF CALEDONIA CAMP

TOM was not yet accustomed to the impetuous manner in which matters moved in the Gulf country, and he had been picturing to himself the ideal life of a camp such as the one he now stood in until he suddenly became aware that trouble was at hand, and that his friend was actually preparing to fight. The thought staggered him. How could the parson, he who had proved himself to be a true seeker after knowledge, and such a sympathetic student of humanity, stand up against this great, hulking person who was coming forward to do him bodily harm? And, what was more to the point, how could he help him?

But he was given little time to think, for Smith had swung out his enormous fist in the parson's face, muttering a ribald joke at the same time, and a murmur of disapproval arose from the onlookers, who had scarcely expected that their comrade would really attack the poor harmless parson. But the poor harmless parson did not seem to be in the least put about, and when Smith's swinging blow came round, and the crowd roared in anticipation of the result, he simply ducked and allowed



"THE LEFT-HANDER MADE HIM REEL BACK AND THE RIGHT
KNOCKED HIM OVER."

[To face page 30.]

the man's arm to pass over his head. Then, before Smith realised that he had missed his mark, his left hand shot out and upwards, quickly followed by his right, which went straight forward from the shoulder ; the left-hander met Smith under the chin and made him reel back, and the right knocked him over.

"First round to the parson," shouted the men. "Come on, Smith. Stand to time."

Smith got up sullenly and made a vicious rush at the parson, but somehow Nigger got between his legs, and he tripped and fell heavily to the ground before he got within reach of his smiling opponent.

"Second round to the parson," cried the men, seemingly well pleased. "Get up, Smith."

Again Smith rose to his feet and rushed at the parson, and this time the two men closed together, but only for a moment, then Smith dropped, a limp mass on the sand, and lay still.

"Third round to the parson," shrieked the men, almost joyfully.

"And last, I think," added that individual. "Smith will not want any more. I got home with my own special trick that time, and no one ever wants a second instalment."

Nor did Smith ; he lay where he had fallen until some of the men lifted him and carried him over to a water-tank. There, they emptied a bucket of the semi-cold fluid over him and left him to recover at his own sweet will.

"Would any other man like to provide entertainment for the rest ?" asked the parson invitingly. "I usually have to knock out at least two in every camp before I get its freedom."

"I don't reckon I want to quarrel with a man who

spiflicated Smith," laughed one man. "You have the run of this camp for me, boss."

"And for me, too," echoed several.

"Here's the day shift coming home, boys, we're late," cried one. "Smash into them too, parson, an' ye'll have us all Sunday-school scholars afore we know where we is."

"I have already had the pleasure of meeting these gentlemen coming from the mine," spoke the parson. "They are all my friends, as is also the manager of this camp. Kindly take Smith away with you, if you really must go; but remember you have got to listen to a few words to-morrow."

"Hullo, parson!" shouted one of the approaching men. "I is mighty glad to get my blinkers on ye; when did ye strike the camp?"

"My horses have not yet been watered, Dave," returned the parson; "I've been giving my credentials to your mates of the afternoon shift."

"An' he knocked out Jim Smith in three rounds," sang out the men; "he's a bosker fighting parson all right."

"Of course he is," returned Dave; and his comrades of the shift coming off work laughed. Their introduction to the parson had been effected in a manner similar to that of the second shift a year before.

"We'll attend to your nags, parson," sang out the newcomers, as their comrades walked over to the mine to take up the work where the former men had left off.

"Hullo, boys, what is wrong now? Who is causing trouble this time? The speaker was a slimly built young man, who in addition to the ordinary garments of the Gulf country wore a collar and tie, and sported an eyeglass and top-boots. He had ridden up behind

the men unperceived. His horse was a noble-looking animal which, even in that country, where the horse is man's chief friend, would have attracted attention, and his saddle and bridle were of the best English leather and pattern.

"It's the boss," exclaimed the men in chorus, evidently surprised somewhat at seeing him. "There aint no trouble this time, boss," added Dave, who seemed to be a sort of foreman in the party; "the parson struck the camp afore we came off work and Jim Smith got to business with him, and there he is lying over beside the water-tank."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hornsby," the parson called out; "I hope everything is going well on the deep levels?"

"Now, why didn't you send out word with any of the teamsters that you were coming our way?" said Mr. Hornsby, dismounting and throwing his reins to one of the men; "I might have missed you, for I was over at some shows on the Tate River and did not intend to come back for a day or two." He shook hands with the parson, then giving some orders to Dave, led the way to the manager's house—a long, low, bungalow-like structure which stood on a rise about a hundred yards distant from the camp.

"Dave," said the parson, as he followed, "this young man is a friend of mine. Look after him in the meantime, and bring him over to the house when I send for him."

"I'll be kinder to him, parson, than a card-sharper down South is to a new chum with whips o' money."

"Then, Tom, I'll send for you after I have talked over some things with Mr. Hornsby. I think we'll get you fixed here for a time until you gain some experience."

"Come on, youngster," said Dave; "I'll interduce ye to the boys. Can ye do anything?"

"I have had very little mining experience as yet," Tom replied, "but I am not afraid of work."

"Work. Only fools work, an' the less ye know of mining the luckier ye'll be prospecting."

"But do not the men of this camp work?" asked Tom in surprise.

"Not much, you bet. A man here is only supposed to go down the shaft with his shift mates, jump a round of holes with his drills into the lode, plug them full of gelagnite, fire them, an' scoot for the top. When the gas clears away he goes back an' shovels the ore into buckets, which his mate hauls up, then he starts all over again, an' goes on until his eight hours are up, or the hanging wall falls in on him."

"But isn't that work?"

"No, bless you, no, that's exercise. If we didn't do that we'd get soft and flabby like a policeman, an' be no use when a new rush broke out anywhere — Oh, I don't suppose ye didn't happen to hear nothing about that new strike at Crocodile Crossing, did ye?"

"I heard two troopers mention that name back at that spring under the last lime bluff."

"Troopers. What are they doin' out this way, I would like to know?"

"They said they were trying to evade catching Chillagoe Charlie."

"And by my water-bag. They've sense. They know that if they did collar him he'd burn their fingers so much that they wouldn't be able to pull a trigger for months after. But you'll find water for a wash in that bucket, an' after you've done we'll see about tucker."

Tom indulged in the luxury of a wash, and then

Dave brought him into the circle of men standing round the camp fire watching the preparation the Japanese cook was making for their evening meal.

"Boys, stand out, or show yourselves somehow when your handle is called," spoke Dave; "I reckon this youngster has got to know ye all——"

"Cut it, Dave, and get ahead with the ceremony," interrupted one of the men, a pleasant-faced person of most untidy appearance otherwise.

"The gentleman who spoke is Dirty Sam," proceeded Dave; "he can't mine worth three old postage stamps, but he's a bosker on the shoot; isn't he a dandy?"

Dirty Sam bowed in approved fashion, and Dave went on—

"That fellow next him is Peter the Poet. He could give fits to Kipling."

Peter the Poet acknowledged his title with a deprecating smile.

"Ginger Bob, Tommy the Kangaroo, Bullocky Bill, Mike O'Flannigan, and Hungry Ted—that's them as they are standing; my own full ticket is Psalm-singing Dave, 'cos I has to sing a hymn or something now, since the Fighting Parson went for me, every time I feel like swearing."

"And he is always singing," laughed Dirty Sam.

"Well, aint I a man of my word? The parson told me that if I didn't stop swearing he'd wallop me, an' I told him that if he could wallop me I would stop."

"Yes, but finish the yarn, Dave," cried Ginger Bob.

"Why, he went for me as easy as a skeeter goes for a new chum——"

"But that's not all. Out with the rest," persisted the gingery one.

"You're gettin' mighty particular, Ginger," said

Dave. "You all know that I kept from swearin' for nearly three-quarters of a day, although it was powerfully hard; but when Tommy the Kangaroo went an' fell down the Number One shaft an' burst the pair of pants I had given him a day of, what man could keep from swearing? I tell ye, it wasn't natural; so I hunted up the parson an' told him I would peg out if he wouldn't let me out of my bargain. He said it was impossible; but he gave me the tip to sing a hymn when I felt the desire comin' on, an' I've done that ever since."

Just then the cook announced that everything was ready, and the men took their places round a table built with the boards of discarded packing-cases.

"So now ye know us all, youngster," continued Dave, as the meal proceeded; "we are the day-shift men of Caledonia Camp, but we are also the boss's own men. It's him we work for, not the great millionaires away in England who own the mines."

"Are the men of the other two shifts not the same as you?" Tom asked, feeling quite at home among the quaint, picturesquely named miners.

"Not much," snorted Bullocky Bill; "they're only a scratch lot put on to help us to get the mines down into the sulphides as soon as possible. You have nothing to do with them, they are a bad lot."

"I'll bet any one of them could give points to Chillagoe Charlie for downright cussedness," said Peter the Poet. "That fellow Smith, for instance, looks as if hanging would do him good."

"But say, boy, how did you come to fall in with the parson?" suddenly inquired Dirty Sam. "You can't have known him long, for your face shows you are a stranger in the Gulf country."

"He overtook me back at that spring to-day. I was

coming out this way looking for work of some kind, and he took me with him," answered Tom. "I can do assay work fairly well, and he thought I might be useful here."

"Then you'll be stayin' with us?" observed Dave, refilling his enamelled cup with hot tea from the billy. "Lad, we make you welcome; it's a mighty long time since we saw a face that hadn't got Gulf written all over it."

"I do hope I may be allowed to stay among you," Tom said. "Until to-day I had no friends anywhere, and now that I have met so many I will feel very queerly if Nigger and I have to wander on again ourselves."

"There aint no fear of that, my boy," said Dave, "We——" He paused abruptly and next moment began singing lustily "There is a happy land."

"Shut up!" roared the men; "you've sworn all day with that tune."

The singer again stopped and glared round the table. "Oh——" he began, but recollecting himself in time the expletive died on his lips, and instead he warbled "Way down upon the Swanee River."

"That's not a hymn, Dave," corrected Dirty Sam. "But what's the matter, anyhow?"

"A tarantula has just taken enough outen my leg in one bite to last it for a week—— Oh! that will be joyful!"

"I'm jiggered if ye look it," put in Tommy the Kangaroo.

But Dave was now dancing round the table. He had killed the creature when first he had felt the intense burning sensation in his limb, but the pain was now almost more than he could bear, and the perspiration streamed from his rugged face. "Glory, Glory

Hallelujah!" he next tried but with no soothing results; then crying out, "Boys, I must swear or I'll burst," he rushed from the table and began racing round the camp. While engaged in this form of exercise, and receiving much strange advice from his comrades who stood watching, the sun went down behind the western scrub, and the stars shone out above.

At length Dave threw himself down exhausted and Tom, who had meanwhile been foraging in a case of assaying chemicals which had only arrived that day, and had not yet been placed under cover, rolled up the leg of Dave's trousers and applied some fluid from a bottle he had found. The treatment seemed to relieve the sufferer greatly, and he sat up and watched Tom interestedly. Peter the Poet had lit a candle, and although the microscopic prick of the wound itself was barely discernible, the swelling around it was ample guide as to its whereabouts.

"Kick me, boys, if I thought on that," Dave exclaimed, as the pungent smell of the lotion revealed its identity. "Ammonia is good for all sorts of poisonous bites or stings. Are ye a bit of a doctor, youngster?"

"Not much," replied Tom; "but I am sure that is much less painful now."

"It's almost away—and, boys, I didn't swear after all. My word's not broken."

The men moved over to the camp fire, and squatted round the cheerful blaze of some cedar logs, not by any means for warmth, for the temperature at the moment throughout the camp was 106° and would not fall two points during the entire night. But the innumerable pests which come forth after dark in North Queensland do not like the smoke of a camp fire, and

therefore man has so adapted himself that he feels there is something wrong if a blinding smoke-cloud does not hang about him.

Sitting thus the men in turn told some of their many strange experiences in the Gulf country and elsewhere. Mike O'Flannigan, a quiet, undemonstrative man, whose speech had in it hardly any trace of the brogue his name—if it were his real name—would have led one to expect, told how he had taken part in the Mount Scratchley gold rush over in New Guinea, and Ginger Bob gave his experiences while on a prospecting trip right up to Cape York.

"But how did you get along with the Chinkies, Bob?" Dave asked; "we had whips of trouble with the yellow beggars on the Palmer River."

"We rubbed along somehow," Ginger Bob answered, "but we kept as far away from the Palmer as we could. Have you ever heard of their hidden city somewhere up there?"

"Haven't I?" said Dave. "Don't I know over a dozen prospectors who got their last call while hunting round for it? I would like to be one of a party to go an' wipe them out, city and all."

"I took part in that wolfram rush over on the Mitchell," began Tommy the Kangaroo. "We were chased away by the yellowskins, who came over from the Palmer like droves of cattle. They fell in after all, though, for the wolfram was too poor to get a fair price."

"That reminds me, boys," interrupted Dirty Sam. "What about this new rush at Crocodile Crossing? It seems to be a big thing. A couple of swaggies came over to the mine to-day, while I was at the windlass, for a drink of water, and they told me that the whole population of the Peninsula were making for it."

"But what is the rush on?" asked Peter the Poet. "Is it gold, or copper, or diamonds, or has tin been struck out there? The country near the Crossing looks as if it could carry tin, and it commands a boncer price just now."

"No one seems to know exactly what has been found," answered Dirty Sam. "It is just a rush, and maybe it's for false teeth. Old Cowley, the Government Mine Inspector, lost his out that way, he told the boss, and maybe some one has found them and thinks there are reefs of them somewhere around."

At this point Nigger, who had that night enjoyed the best meal that had ever come his way, roused himself from his master's feet and began barking, and the men looked round to see the reason.

"It's the boss and the parson," said Dave; "I hear their voices."

"I don't think it can be them Nigger is barking for," said Tom; "Nigger knows them, and that is not the bark he has for friends."

The men laughed at the idea of the dog's language being understood by Tom, and Peter the Poet said, "Well, I reckon he's cheated you this time, for here they are," and as he spoke the mine manager and the parson stepped into the fire-lit circle.

Nigger, however, still continued to bark until Tom ordered him to desist, and then he went out into the darkness growling.

"Well, boys, telling yarns as usual," the youthful manager called out; "I've come over to get this young gentleman to sign on with us. Tell him, parson."

"You are now the official assayer of the Caledonia group of mines, Tom," said the parson.

"And I have brought some work for you to do now, my lad—that is, if you can work out any analysis in

candle light." He produced a piece of something that looked like a stone picked from the ground and handed it to Tom. "Can you do anything with that," he asked, "without daylight? It is rather important that I should know. It's copper, of course."

Tom's heart had fallen when he realised that he was asked to assay a piece of ore without the aid of daylight. The volumetric process, which was the system he had specially studied, depended for its accuracy upon the correct reading of the tints the dissolved metal assumed when cyanide of potassium of known strength was added, and in artificial light it was almost impossible to read the colours correctly. But when he saw the ore a feeling of relief came over him, and he said, "I don't require to assay that piece of ore, sir, to tell you its contents. It goes twenty-four, point five, per cent. copper, fourteen ounces of silver, and four pennyweights of gold to the ton."

"Howling dingoes!" yelled the men in amazement.

"I'll be baked into a damper if I ever heard of any fellow who could tell ye the copper, silver, and gold in an ore by just looking at it," supplemented Dave. "Has it got a ticket on its back tellin' ye?"

Plainly the men were incredulous, but the parson and the manager looked at each other curiously. Tom had told them the copper percentage exactly that which a hurried assay made by the parson before sundown had showed the specimen to contain.

"Boys, Tom is right," said the manager; "but how he knows is a mystery to me. It takes me all my time to assay a piece of ore with all my appliances, and even then, it would take me half a day to tell the gold, silver, and copper."

The parson was greatly astonished. "How did you know, Tom? You did not guess, I'm sure."

"That's a sample from Crocodile Crossing anyway, boys. I rode out there to-day," said the manager. "When I picked that up I came back in a hurry to get it assayed, and it looks as if we had better make a try to peg out some ground there now. Ore like that, carrying gold and silver, doesn't exist everywhere. But are you sure, Tom?"

"I am, sir; but let me explain how I happen to know, and then you'll know what to think about the matter. I walked up from the coast all the way until to-day, looking for work. Down the railway line no one would employ me for fear of the new labour laws, although at every camp I struck the manager was always willing to give me what he called an odd job, and pay me well for it. Thus I got out here; but during the last week I have seen pieces of that ore, bits all broken from the same original specimen, I should say, in every camp I entered. At first I assayed the stuff, as requested, for few of the small camps have any one who can do that work, and the men were afraid to send the specimen away to the professional assayers, thinking the specimen might be traced by them to where it came from and the ground jumped. My first assay gave me the results I have given you, and six times since then I have gone carefully through the same process, with the same results, at different camps. My last attempt was to-day in Murgooona. Some one had told a saloon keeper there that I was an assayer, and he called me in and gave me all the materials to work with. But I knew the ore by this time, and therefore was not surprised to get once more the same result. The hotel keeper offered to employ me as an odd man and pay me full labour wages if I would stay with him and do any assaying work he might require done; he seemed to be gamb-

ing a great deal in mining properties, but I didn't come to the Gulf country to accept charity from a saloon keeper, so I came on here."

"And that is another piece of the same ore, Tom?" the parson asked.

"I am positively sure, sir."

"What game is on, parson, and who is working it?" The speaker was Mr. Hornsby.

"I can't imagine, but it is a deep one at any rate. You found the specimen yourself?"

"I did; but then I went about the reef as any prospector would have done, and it is possible that that piece of ore was placed by a clever man just where a practised prospector would look for it."

"Snakes, boys!" gasped Peter the Poet. "It's somebody trying to make a rush. Crocodile Crossing is a fake."

"That are a fact," agreed Tommy the Kangaroo; "but what's the idea in the thing, and who is behind it?"

"Most likely a gang of the hotel and shanty keepers between here an' down the line somewhere," said Bullocky Bill. "They'll raise the rush an' sell out their claims to green new chums before it bursts."

"At anyrate, Tom," said the parson, who had been talking in an undertone to Mr. Hornsby, "the labour conditions of Queensland need not trouble you any longer. You are now among men who will stick to you; but have as little dealings as possible with the other two shifts; they are not the sort of men Mr. Hornsby and I have had with us on our trips, as your present comrades are. They are merely employed by the Caledonia Company, and may, or may not, be decent fellows. But goodbye just now, Tom. I may not see you in the morning, but I'll look you up soon."

"Are you going away, sir?" cried Tom in surprise, not unmixed with sorrow.

"I have an important engagement which I had almost forgotten, my boy, but all arrangements are made for you. Dave, I put Tom in your hands. Good-night all."

"And take a look round the camp, men," said Mr. Hornsby. "I am sure, from the way that dog is behaving, that there is some one about. Good-night."

"Good-night, boss; good-night, parson," responded the men, and the two walked out into the night.

"I wouldn't mind going nap on the fact that there really is some one hanging about the camp," ventured Hungry Ted, who had been unusually silent all evening. "That dog out there is nearly bursting to bark, but daren't 'cos his boss told him not to."

"Ask him what is the reason of his antics," said Dirty Sam to Tom.

"I'll bet he's like me," grinned Dave; "he was told not to bark, an' he doesn't know any hymn to sing instead. Do ye know, I reckon a dog thinks he is kicking up blazes when he's barking."

"Come here, Nigger," Tom called out, and immediately his little four-footed friend was by his side, trembling with excitement.

"What is it?" asked Tom. "Any one coming?"

Then Nigger voiced his thoughts, and so plain were they to all, that Dave said, "Great Gulf of Carpentaria! that quadruped has an onusually powerful command of language. Hear him, mates. He says as plain as that mosquito on Ginger's nose that we're too late to see people coming—that they're here now."

Nigger ran out growling ferociously, and the men followed.

"It will be some of the other shift over for tools or

a bucket of drinking water," spoke Ginger Bob as they got out into the surrounding bush.

"No fear; here's a couple of saddled horses hitched to this tree," sang out Tommy the Kangaroo.

"An' they're Government horses," cried Dave, examining their bridles intently. "There's troopers skulking about the tents. My! we'll all be robbed."

"Keep off, you brute!" a voice sounded quite near, then Nigger's angry tones showed he had received a kick and was contemplating revenge.

"Close round, boys," cried Dirty Sam; "this isn't Russia, and we'll be mighty soft fools if we allow policemen to come into a camp, like this."

"It will be bad for the man I get my feelers on," muttered Ginger Bob; "I don't like their breed."

"Here, boys, call off this fiery untamed dingo of yours," came a voice from the darkness. "This isn't the kind of welcome we counted on getting at Caledonia Camp."

"Then why didn't ye enter at the front door an' ring the bell?" demanded Dave indignantly. "We don't allow no one, even the King of Russia and China, to creep in by the back——"

"We beg pardon, boys, but we got bushed, and when we saw your camp light we just made straight for it," answered the same voice. And its owner and a companion coming forward, Tom recognised the sergeant and his comrade with whom he had parted at the springs that day.

"Ye've been a mighty long time bushed," grumbled Dave. "This dog has had its mind on ye for at least half an hour—but come an' get some tucker; the cook has turned in, but I reckon we can boil a billy without him. What are ye after out here?"

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"Ye've been a mighty long time bushed," grumbled Dave. "This dog has had its mind on ye for at least half an hour—but come an' get some tucker ; the cook has turned in, but I reckon we can boil a billy without him. What are ye after out here ?"

"Chillagoe Charlie. We didn't mean to come on

this length until to-morrow, but a rider came out to us back at the springs, with a message from the boss who came off the ore train at Murgoona last night, which made us saddle up quick and lively. Ah, thanks, boys, this cold beef is all right, and your pickles are prime." They had regained the dining apartment—a tent fly surmounted by a shade of branches—while speaking, and the men had at once placed food before the troopers.

"But Chillagoe Charlie won't risk coming in so near to a township," said Dirty Sam. "He could gain nothing, and he couldn't hope to escape being actually seen, as he seems to have done so far."

"It is easily seen you don't know Charlie," laughed the sergeant, helping himself to a chunk of damper. His comrade was too hungry to find time to speak.

"No, I don't, that's a fact; but does any one know him? Has he ever been seen in broad daylight by men in their sober senses?" Dirty Sam was greatly interested.

"Well, yes, he was seen by one man anyway who never tasted anything in his life stronger than crude lime-juice, and that man is our boss. I don't know whether it was in broad daylight or not, but it was sometime between the time the ore train got in last night and noon to-day."

"Do you mean that Chillagoe Charlie was in Murgoona so recently as that?" persisted Dirty Sam.

"I do. My! I wish I had seen him. I would give my horse—and it's my own, bridle and all—to clap eyes on him. Oh, by the way, my lad, did the parson stop here with you?"

"Ye can't see the parson to-night," growled Dave, before Tom could speak. "He's turned in 'cos he has to make an early start in the morning."

"Oh, I'll see him before he starts, then. You see, he must have left Murgooona about the same time as Charlie, and we know our man came this way—at least if he didn't he's trapped by this time, for the tracks going north, south, and east are all watched—and we thought the parson might have seen his tracks as he came along in his buggy."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Peter the Poet, "do you expect to find Charlie anywhere where a track leads? He wouldn't worry about tracks, he'd take the bush."

"No, I don't think so; he doesn't worry about us fellows enough to go off the road for us. I expect we'll run him down at some water-hole, or among the men at some new rush. He can't keep away from any sensational rush, they say."

"But give us the yarn about how the chief of your fellows came to see Charlie, and didn't catch him," said Mike O'Flannigan.

"Oh, it's a great yarn—the tracker who came out to us to-day told me; but I don't know that I've any right to give the story away on the boss."

"If it is as good as all that, why keep it among yourselves?" said Dirty Sam.

"Tell us, an' I'll get the big spare tent fixed up for ye to-night," added Dave as an inducement. "Tom here is gettin' the small one beside it."

"We thought of going on to Moldiva Camp to-night," began the sergeant tentatively; but the roar of laughter which greeted his announcement showed him that his listeners were well accustomed to the easy-going ways of the troopers in the Gulf country, and after trying to look as if he did not understand where the joke came in, for a minute, he laughed too, and his satellite joined him.

"All right, boys, if you can fix us up comfortably for

the night without too much trouble, and raise a feed for our horses, we'll stay with you. But see that my horse gets some corn; it's a real blood, and carries no Government brand, and bar none is the best gee-gee that ever put foot north of the Darling Downs. It will be that horse which will be the means of putting an end to Chillagoe Charlie's career if I ever get on his track. But there's some one about; look at that dog, how it is listening. Why the mischief doesn't it bark?"

"There ain't no one near or it would bark," grunted Dave. "Go on with your yarn 'bout your boss. See, the dog is lying down now."

"There really isn't much to tell, boys. Our boss came up on the ore train last night, and came down to the barracks to see the local fellows and us. But my word, he was crusty; he told us all Australia was laughing at us for not putting the hobbles on Charlie, and said, before a mob of the miners too, that if Brisbane would give him the chance to go out tracking again, he would sink the promotion he got for that affair down at Charleyville, and save the Gov. its thousand pounds—we are not allowed any reward, you know—by going out after Charlie himself."

"But what has this man done that the whole country should be roused against him?" asked Tom.

"I'm jiggered if I know. I never read the charges," answered the sergeant. "But the whole country isn't up against him; the people don't know him, he has never been seen at close quarters by any one, and we only know that he has been at work because he always very politely leaves his card behind with his compliments——"

"But may not lots of men be taking advantage of Chillagoe Charlie's reputation and thus getting him blamed for what he knows nothing of?"

"I have thought something like that myself once or twice," put in the younger trooper. "It seems very strange to me how he could be at the O. K. one night, at Chillagoe the next, and maybe away near Cloncurry a couple of nights after, and no one see him travelling."

"I reckon he must have one of these new-fangled machines that fly through the air," ventured Hungry Ted. "I read of a fellow in last week's *Sydney Bulletin* who reckoned he could do that, only the blamed machine he rode always got the bit between its teeth somehow and bolted in the wrong direction."

"That was a story you read, Ted," said Dirty Sam. "You haven't told us about your boss and his adventure yet, sergeant?"

"No, I lost hang of the yarn somehow. Where was I?"

"He had been givin' ye beans for not catchin' Charlie," reminded Sam.

"Oh, yes; he fairly walked into us; of course, we didn't mind a bit, special duty pay doesn't come along every day; and after giving us a bundle of new notices about Charlie to post up at the big rush out at Crocodile Crossing, he went up to the hotel. We walked about the town after that for a bit and heard that travelling parson give a boncer speech or sermon to a crowd of miners, then we went back to the barracks. About breakfast-time to-day, when we were saddled up ready for the road, an aboriginal came into the barracks with a note, written on the back of one of the new notices, which said, 'Go to big bloodwood-tree near abandoned shaft on the Unicorn Mine.' Well, that job was not in our line, nor did any of us lay any stress on it, but the local troopers said they would attend to it later, and we came away. We camped at the springs where we met the parson and that youngster,

and intended to come on here to-morrow, but just as we had built a sun shade and were getting ready for a good sleep a local trooper came up at a hard gallop and gave us orders from the boss which made us get on the track again at once, to catch up the parson——”

“What!” shouted the men! “ye’ll never leave this camp with life in ye if ye say a word against the parson.”

“Who is going to say a word against him?” said the sergeant, surprised at the sudden outburst. “The tracks of his buggy and his two horses and those of that youngster there are all that left Murgoona leading this way since Black Bill went out yesterday afternoon—barring our own, of course.”

“But what has that got to do with your story?” demanded Dirty Sam, a trifle aggressively.

“Well, we thought he might have seen Charlie, and perhaps given him a lift without knowing who he was. Anyhow, the trooper told me that the black trackers had drawn mile circles round the town but had cut no tracks bar those I told you of. The train was stopped down the line, but to no good, and Charlie is not in Murgoona; so where the mischief is he, unless he has melted?”

“Did you expect him to come in to pay his respects to your boss?” asked Peter the Poet sarcastically. “Otherwise, how did you so suddenly take offence at his lack of manners?”

“And by all the wonders of the Gulf country, that is just what Charlie did do,” said the sergeant. “I forgot to say that the rider told us that when they went out to the bloodwood-tree they found the boss tied to it, with a ticket on his back on which was written, ‘With Chillagoe Charlie’s compliments.’ Now, do you understand why we had to hustle?”

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I tell you the worries of a trooper's life out in this part of the world are more than you mining fellows can imagine."

"So it would appear," laughed Dirty Sam. "But it's late, let's get to bed. Whose turn is it to go out for the horses to-morrow?"

"Mine," said Mike O'Flannigan carelessly.

All the men partook of a cup of tea, and soon after the camp was wrapped in slumber.

CHAPTER III

CHILLAGOE CHARLIE

TOM awoke with a start, and lay still, trying to remember where he was. Then he raised his eyes to the stars to see what time it was, as had been his custom when he awoke during the night while coming up from Cairns on the coast. But he could see no stars, and when he stretched his hands out, instead of feeling the hard ground they came in contact with a mosquito net which completely surrounded him. Then he realised that he was lying on a bed made of canvas stretched between long runners of wood and mounted about eighteen inches off the ground. "I must be dreaming," he muttered, turning over to go to sleep again. "Where are you, Nigger?"

For answer Nigger placed his paws against the mosquito net and tried to lift it, growling sullenly at the same time. Suddenly Tom remembered everything and he sat upright. "Of course," he said to himself, "I am in a tent; how silly of me to forget! And this is the net Dave placed over me, and Nigger got a kangaroo skin to lie on underneath the bunk. But why did I awake just now? Oh, yes, it must have been the third shift going out at midnight to relieve the afternoon men. Why, what's the matter,

Nigger?" He got up, and stepping carefully on the ant-bed floor, in case he might tread on some prowling snake or other dangerous visitor, he walked to the open flap of the tent and looked out. It was long past midnight, he saw at once, for already some of the stars he had grown to know heralded the coming of morning were appearing.

The camp was silent, and the waning half-moon shed an eerie light over all. Tom bent down and patted Nigger. "It's a false alarm this time," he said. "We'll go back and sleep. We're going to be anchored here for a time, Nigger, for I have got a job now, and you must get acquainted with all the men and everything else about the place as soon as you can, so that you won't be hauling me out of bed at every sound you hear. We're not on the march now, you know."

Whether Nigger understood his master's words or not, he made no comment, and soon Tom had turned in again. But he did not sleep now. He knew Nigger had heard something which he thought his master ought to know about, but the fact that he had not barked told Tom that he himself knew the cause and did not apprehend danger. And Nigger was still very much perturbed, behaving in the same manner as he had done while the trooper was telling his story.

"By your four legs, Nigger!" said Tom, suddenly remembering the incident. "There was some one about that time, although no one knew but you and I, and it is just as clear that there is some one prowling around now."

He sat up again and, lifting the flap of the tent beside his pillow, peered through. His vision extended from the camp right down past the chief mine of the group until lost in the bush beyond.

He could make out the great heaps of ore lying around the mine shaft, and hear the creaking of the steel ropes as they wound and rewound themselves on the barrel of the hoisting apparatus. "Nigger must have heard a dingo howling," he muttered. "There is nothing in sight—but what's that?" His heart jumped; but, fascinated, his eyes became fixed on something only a hundred yards from the back of his tent. At first, in the dim moonlight, he had thought he was looking at two trees and their shadows, but trees did not move over the ground even in North Queensland, and it was a movement that had arrested his eyes. Nearer and near the something came, and soon Tom saw that it was a man leading a horse. He crossed a patch of hard sand barren of scrub, and the watcher saw that the man's entire dress consisted of riding breeches, top-boots, a soft shirt, belt, and a large-brimmed soft felt hat. He also saw that the horse carried a rifle across its saddle, and that it was a thoroughbred. Next moment the man turned his face towards him, and Tom almost cried out in his surprise. The upper part of the man's face was masked, and he carried a revolver in his free hand.

"It's Chillagoe Charlie," Tom muttered to himself, holding Nigger's nose to prevent him barking. "I never dreamt that such a character could exist even up here, in this age."

The man halted and threw his bridle over a limb of a tree on the edge of the sand patch; then, silent and motionless, he stood for a moment surveying the sleeping camp.

"I wonder what I should do," Tom asked himself. "If I move to raise an alarm he could shoot me through the tent, and if I don't he'll perhaps rob the camp of everything valuable it contains. Ah! he'll



"'IT'S CHILLAGOE CHARLIE,' TOM MUTTERED."

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bring about his own downfall. Poor beggar ; I feel I would like to warn him."

The visitor had left his horse alone, and was walking over to the tent in which slept the two troopers. He walked boldly and without any signs of hesitation, and a minute later disappeared inside the troopers' tent. At that moment the moon shone out brighter and Tom recognised the waiting horse as the one in which the sergeant took so much pride.

"Why, what a fool I am!" he laughed! "My nerves must be unstrung. That man must be the sergeant himself. He couldn't have gone so boldly into that tent without being challenged were he not. He has some suspicion about something, that is why he and his comrade hid around the camp before announcing themselves, and he has taken his horse from the yard and got it ready for a surprise ride somewhere. He's probably gone in for his coat now, and to leave some final instructions with the trooper. I wonder if I should let him know I am not sleeping? No, I'll keep my own counsel, he might not like to know that he was watched, and Dave or some of the boys can explain the whole thing most likely at sunrise."

Apparently Tom had reasoned correctly, for just then the man came out of the troopers' tent with his full uniform on. He strode quickly to his horse and lightly vaulting into the saddle cantered silently away into the bush in a direction that would cut the main track about a mile from the camp. "It's all over now, Nigger," said Tom, setting the dog free. "Go to sleep and call me at sunrise."

He turned over himself, and wondering why the sergeant wore a mask, fell asleep without reaching any solution of the mystery.

And the stars faded in the sky, the black cockatoos

in the tops of some cedar-trees began chattering, and the sun shot up from behind the line of lime bluffs. Another day of scorching heat had begun. But it had not long begun when a series of angry shouts arose from the troopers' tent which at once roused the entire camp, and to a man they turned out.

"Blow your old bones, Tommy Kuropatkin," grumbled hungry Ted sleepily, thinking it was the cook who was the cause of the disturbance, "you're givin' us shorter measure every day. It's only half-past six, an' we don't start work till the night boys come off at eight."

"It no me kick up row," responded the Japanese cook, who had been attending to his duties over the camp fire for some time previously; "it them blamed police-fellows."

"Hallo there, boys," sang out a voice from the noisy tent, "who has played this trick? May I never draw the price of a drink, of special duty pay again, if I don't knock him into next week in one round——"

"It's a row between the two troopers," cried Dave gleefully; "come over an' see fair play, boys."

Every one at once rushed to the tent, where they were confronted by the sergeant in his night attire. The trooper was turning the tent inside out looking for something.

"Who has done it?" roared the sergeant in a great temper. "By thunder! I'll fight the whole camp before I am done with this."

"One will be quite enough to accommodate you perhaps," said Dirty Sam quietly; "tell us what you are suffering from and we'll see——"

"An' git into your togs afore ye come out. Ye're not respectable as ye are," added Dave.

"Get into my togs!" roared the man. "How in

Gulf thunder can I do that until you bring them to me ? They have been taken away by some of you stupid beggars."

"Best go slow with your talk, sergeant," spoke Dirty Sam ; "some of us don't like it, and you may swallow a few teeth over it."

"Swallow teeth ! I'll swallow the camp——"

"Oh, blow ye for a skiting policeman ! Stand out an' I'll do the parson trick with ye myself," cried Dave, who could not understand what the sergeant was driving at.

Tom preserved a discreet silence. He intended to watch developments before he said anything.

"Are you fellows going to bring me my clothes or are you not ?" asked the sergeant, with a forced calmness. "Remember a joke can go too far, and this means interfering with an officer of the Crown in discharge of his duties."

"No one here knows anything about your clothes," answered Peter the Poet ; "you should have kept them glued on to your carcase if you walk in your sleep and hide things. We have no Chillagoe Charlie here——"

"It looks as if you had," interrupted the young trooper suddenly, picking up a card from the floor and glancing at it ; "he's been here, and he's taken the boss's togs away with him."

"What !" yelled the men ; "Chillagoe Charlie here !"

"Let's see the card," demanded the sergeant gruffly ; "and here, boys, I apologise for my language to you. Charlie has been here. Some of you get Lightning, my horse, saddled for me and I'll track him down before sunset."

"Read the card," cried Tommy the Kangaroo.

"Sorry to put you to any inconvenience, sergeant," read the officer with flushed face, "but I require your

uniform for a time. Will return it to-morrow.—
C. C.”

“Well, I’ll be—be—God save our gracious King——” began Dave. “Charlie has taken the breeches from a policeman.”

“Get my horse, quick !” shouted the discomfited man ; “I’ll catch him without clothes. Saddle up, Storey. No stop until we catch the beggar. His tracks will be fresh——”

“Your horse aint in the yard,” cried Ginger Bob ; “but here’s another card for ye.”

The men crowded around Ginger, who had just returned from the horse yard, and the sergeant seized the card from his hand. There was an oblong piece of paper pinned to it, which was written out in the form of a cheque with the amount not filled in, but the signature Chillagoe Charlie in the proper place.

“Read the ticket,” roared the men. “Maybe he’s tellin’ ye where he’ll be waitin’ for ye.”

“‘DEAR SERGEANT,—I have urgent need of the fastest animal in the Gulf country,’” he read, “‘so have taken yours. Kindly fill in the amount at which you value it on the attached form, and nail it on the tree at the springs under the notice regarding me, and you will be paid in cash as soon after as will be convenient for me.—CHILLAGOE CHARLIE.’”

“Ha ! ha !” roared the men, “how about your shouting last night ?”

“I’ll shoot him on sight,” spluttered the officer of the law, “I’ll—I’ll tear his life from him. I’ll—— Oh, my Lightning, I would rather he had put a bullet in my hide than taken that horse.” Here the sergeant seemed as if he would break down, and his assistant grinned with delight at the thought of the figure his

superior would cut at headquarters when the story became known.

"I don't see that you have any call to feel so bad about the thing," put in Peter the Poet sympathetically, for now that the sergeant's pride was humbled the rough but kind-hearted back-blockers were very sorry for him.

"Come an' have breakfast, an' the boss will give ye a rig-out, an' a good horse after," said Dave. "His riding togs are the same stuff as yours, an' I reckon he's got some nags that wouldn't be far behind your Lightning if it came to a desperate push."

"Here's the men who knocked off at midnight coming up," said Dirty Sam; "perhaps some of them who were on top can tell you something which may help you, sergeant."

"Boys, do me a favour for any sake," implored the sergeant; "don't tell any of them. I know you fellows are all square, but I don't like the push that works the other shifts here."

"We are not great shakes on them ourselves," said Hungry Ted; "but let us get to tucker, I am hungry."

"Say, mates," called out Jim Smith, as the second shift men, who had been rudely aroused from their slumbers with the noise, drew near, "what's gone wrong in Caledonia Camp when troopers go flying past the mines at night like they were hot on Chillagoe Charlie's trail?"

"Did you see any troopers?" asked the junior trooper in astonishment.

"You bet I did. I couldn't sleep after comin' off duty last night at midnight, this eye the blamed parson gave me was so sore, and sometime afore mornin', when I came out of bunk to get some water for it, I

saw a trooper scoot like a willy-willy over the rise between here and the mine."

"Oh, that was the sergeant of the special duty men trying a new horse, said Dirty Sam airily. "A couple of them got in here last night, but the boss made an early start, it seems."

"Yes, and hasn't left any orders for me," added the trooper, taking his cue from Sam's words. His superior meanwhile was getting inside some of Peter the Poet's garments.

"Hurry, boys, we're late," cried Dirty Sam; "it's nearly eight o'clock now."

"Here's the boss comin'," said Ginger Bob; "we'll catch it for not being ready."

But they didn't. "Boys," Mr. Hornsby announced as he came near, "I want the day shift to come with me to open up the big reef on the Walsh River. I have a letter from home in the mail the parson brought out telling me that an expert is coming to examine all the properties, and I would like to see what is under the cap of that reef before he arrives. Smith, you may get up a scratch shift from the other two lots to keep the water down where you are working just now. You needn't do any work but that, and of course the boys will draw double pay for doing the extra shift."

"All right, boss," answered Smith, pleased to have been given charge of the other two gangs; "I'll manage easily." He departed to pick his men, and the day men looked at each other wonderingly; they knew that something underlay their chief's words.

"We had a couple o' troopers stayin' with us last night, boss," began Dave. "They dropped in just after you an' the parson left us——"

"Ah, good morning. I hope you were treated

well?" The manager had just perceived the trooper. "You have a comrade, I believe?"

"I have, sir," replied the trooper, "but he's had a piece of bad luck. Chillagoe Charlie has cleared out with his clothes and his horse, and only left him his compliments and a blank cheque not drawn on any bank."

"Chillagoe Charlie! Do you mean to say that he was here?"

"There are the evidences, sir, and you can judge for yourself," spoke the sergeant, coming from the tent.

Mr. Hornsby adjusted his monocle and stared at the last speaker.

"What are you doing in these clothes?" he said. "You are not Peter the Poet."

"No, sir; I am the sergeant of the special duty men, and, thanks to Chillagoe Charlie, I've had to borrow the togs I'm wearing. But read the cards, sir, and advise me; you are a Justice of the Peace."

"Well, sergeant," the manager remarked after perusing the messages, "I don't see that you need complain. You are told that your uniform will be returned to you and that you have merely to write down your own price for your horse. Make that price big enough to pay for your inconvenience."

"But no bank would cash that cheque, sir."

"You are told very plainly how to get it cashed, and I believe the gentleman known—or rather, I should say, unknown—as Chillagoe Charlie has a reputation for keeping his word. It is rather a unique document, this cheque, however, and I shall be pleased if you will allow me to cash it. Some day I may have an opportunity of collecting its value from the owner of the signature."

"Do you mean it, sir?" The sergeant was plainly astonished to find his cheque of value.

"Certainly, or I should not say it. Fill in the amount and I shall give you my own cheque in exchange, and I venture to think you'll find no trouble in cashing it."

"But I would not have sold Lightning, unless forced to, for any money, sir."

"Perhaps the purchaser may return it if he gets to know that. Meanwhile make him pay its value to you."

"But will you be able to get the money from him?" The sergeant eyed Mr. Hornsby closely.

"Perhaps not. It's a gamble on my part. Still, I believe he'll meet his liabilities."

Taking his subordinate's fountain-pen, the sergeant filled in the cheque for one hundred guineas and handed it to Mr. Hornsby, upon which that gentleman without a word took the same pen and drew out one of his own for the same amount and gave it to the officer.

"I can buy a dozen horses with this, sir, I know," the latter said, "but Lightning was a thoroughbred."

"I know the feeling," sympathised Mr. Hornsby, "but go with the boys and have some breakfast. I can give you some khaki garments very like those you've lost, and I can also let you have a horse of no mean calibre."

"Can I buy them from you, sir? I have no means of squaring up otherwise, for I cannot get a good horse nor clothes without going back to Murgooona, and that—well, if the people there knew that I had been caught so nicely so soon after our boss had been tricked, it would mean that Chillagoe Charlie would become a sort of god among them and he would never be caught."

"Yes, the miners have no love for the police and would make a hero of him as the up-to-date bush-ranger, although why he deserves that title I do not know. Oh, about the clothes—you needn't worry over them; return them when Charlie of Chillagoe returns yours."

"Here are the night shift boys coming off, boss," interrupted Dirty Sam. "Give us our orders and we'll get to work to earn our wages."

"There is no immediate hurry, Sam. The Caledonia Company can stand the loss of an hour without going bankrupt."

"If you would let me have the horse you spoke of, sir," put in the sergeant, "I would like to get away after Chillagoe Charlie while his tracks are fresh."

"Nonsense, man! Take a good breakfast and think over the matter carefully. Do you for a moment imagine that you and your assistant could take the gentleman you mention even if you did come up with him?"

"We'd have a try, anyhow, and either Charlie or I would have no further need, for Lightning——"

"Hullo, boys!" exclaimed Bullocky Bill; "here's the parson comin' over. I thought he was goin' out at sunrise."

A thrill of pleasure ran through Tom. The man whom he had somehow grown to like had not, after all, departed. He could tell him of his experiences during the night.

"Good morning, boys," the parson cried as he approached the shaded erection in which the men were about to have breakfast. "I hope you can give me something to eat, for I am as hungry as three men. I took a long walk down the track this morning; I felt I required some exercise."

"Breakfast is not yet over at the house," said Mr. Hornsby. "I have been waiting for you. And, Tom, come with us, too. I have some special work for you ; you can get something to eat with us."

"Did you see any tracks, sir, when you were out ?" asked the sergeant irrelevantly as the parson went up to the water-tank and took a long drink.

"Dear me, sergeant, I didn't recognise you. Are you still working for special duty pay ?" The parson's voice expressed mild surprise at seeing the troopers.

"Yes, but I'm going to earn it now," answered the sergeant grimly. "Charlie has made it a personal matter since I last saw you."

"Well, I am surprised. How did he make that mistake ?"

"Come up to the house and I'll tell you all about it," said Mr. Hornsby. "Come along, Tom. And, by the way, sergeant, that shift just come off duty in those tents down there may be able to tell you something. Some of them must have seen your man passing. Come up to the house afterwards and get a rig-out."

"Well, Tom, my lad," spoke the parson after they had left the men, "you are bursting to tell me something. What is it ? Have you seen Chillagoe Charlie, or a bunyip, or done anything dreadful ?"

"Charlie is going in for big advertising just now," laughed Mr. Hornsby.

"I am inclined to think that if he is not credited with other people's misdeeds we've about heard the last of him," the parson observed. "He is a victim of circumstances——"

"I saw him last night," blurted out Tom. "That's what I've been keeping back."

"You saw him ?" said Mr. Hornsby. "Then why didn't you shoot him and earn that thousand pounds ?"

"What, sir! Shoot the man whose cheque you have honoured and——"

"I have also offered the second fastest horse I possess to run him down, young man."

"Tell your story, Tom," put in the parson. "How did you happen to see him and how do you know it was he?"

"Nigger awoke me and I looked through the back of the tent and saw a masked man leading the sergeant's horse. He tied the horse to a tree and then went into the tent in which the troopers were, and shortly after came out dressed in the sergeant's clothes over his own and rode away past the mine. I thought at first it was the sergeant himself, but when morning came I knew differently."

"Why didn't you speak then, Tom?" asked the parson. "You could have described the man."

"I thought, sir, that it was no business of mine, and I also thought the sergeant had been well served after his boasting last night. But you didn't hear him, of course."

"No," spoke the parson thoughtfully; "we had left before they arrived."

"Ah, well," said Mr. Hornsby, "here's the house and the cook has breakfast laid out for us. Do you know, parson, I had the mad idea that it was you who had played the trick on the policeman, and I actually prevented the day shift from starting work so as to keep the sergeant from getting after you at once. You were up very early, and I suppose that fact, coupled with the knowledge of your fighting abilities, made me imagine you had impersonated our notorious friend from Chillagoe."

"Ha, ha!" the parson laughed, sitting down at the table, "I'll have to take my exercise in the heat

of the day after this, I can't afford to lose my reputation."

"Well, breakfast is our chief business at present, so wishing Charlie good luck—I'll send you in to cash his cheque to-morrow, I think, Tom—we'll leave him and the troopers to fight out their differences and proceed with what is on hand. Can you ride, Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"And shoot?"

"I have never handled a regulation rifle, sir, but I was the best shot in our miniature rifle club before I left home."

"That's all right, then, a good shot is always a good shot. Do you see that tree straight in line with you and the verandah post, about a couple of hundred yards distant?"

"Yes, there are some bottles hanging from its lower branches."

"Well, take that rifle lying on that box there and break the second bottle. That is my private range, and I keep in form by smashing a bottle every morning."

He took the rifle from Tom's hands. "This is a Winchester," he went on, "but one must get accustomed to any kind." Still sitting at table he raised the weapon carelessly and fired through the open window.

"That's the first one out of your way," he laughed, as one of the bottles fell to the ground in innumerable pieces. "Let me see you account for the next one now."

Tom took the rifle, and ejecting the spent cartridge, and at the same time automatically placing another one in the breech, took careful aim. "I am afraid I

can't do it sitting as you did, sir," he said ; " I don't know how you held the rifle so steady."

" Stand up, then, Tom ; fire any way you like."

Instantly Tom arose, and, glancing along the sights for a moment, pulled the trigger. The bottle fell, as did the first one, and Mr. Hornsby laughed.

" You'll do, Tom," he said ; " I wanted to try you. Do you want a shot, parson ?"

The parson took the smoking weapon gingerly. " Which end do you put to your shoulder ?" he asked. " Does it hurt when it goes off ?"

" Oh, come, parson, you have handled a rifle before," cried Mr. Hornsby. " Don't hold it that way, place the butt against your shoulder."

" Thanks ; what do you do now ?"

" Aim and pull the trigger, of course."

" Oh, is that all." The parson pointed the rifle in the direction of the hanging bottle, and, while Mr. Hornsby was laughing at his apparent clumsiness, fired.

" Well, your bullet will hit something when it reaches the ground at any rate," said the mine manager, looking up. " Why ! you've struck the bottle."

" Of course, wasn't I meant to do that—— ?"

" You are an old fraud, parson ; only a crack shot could do that. Why, man, I question very much if the greatly sought after Chillagoe Charlie could equal that shot."

The parson smiled. " They say he can do wonders with the revolver," he said ; " but, dear me, I must be getting on my way. I am going out to see how the men are doing at the new rush."

" I had forgotten all about that. In view of Tom's strange assay last night, things may be expected to

develop there shortly. I'll ride out with you, and you, Tom, can come too. We'll pack some assaying materials in the parson's buggy and see what really is in the rush, and whether the shareholders in the Caledonia Company will be benefited by our securing some ground for them."

"I see the sergeant coming up," observed the parson; "doubtless he is anxious to get away."

"Well, sergeant, have you made any discoveries?" cried Mr. Hornsby, as the man came near. "I have told my man to look out some stuff for you, and you can have that bay horse in the yard down there."

"Thank you, sir; I'll get away at once. Quite a number of your men who went on at midnight saw Chillagoe Charlie. He galloped past the main shaft, and even shouted out something to the men on top at the time. They, of course, thought it was me. My assistant has already picked up his tracks, and with luck we'll not be far away from him by night."

"He's maybe not very far away now," said the parson. "Which way did he go? I don't want to meet him, although I don't suppose he can have any interest in travelling parsons."

"His tracks lead south, sir. We'll have no trouble in following them, for I would know old Lightning's hoof marks anywhere."

"Ah, well, good luck to you," said Mr. Hornsby; "we're going out to Crocodile Crossing. Can we do anything for you?"

"If you could tell the couple of troopers there that I am hot after Charlie and that he has gone south, I would be obliged. They may be able to get away to help to round him up, and there's a relief going out anyway the day after to-morrow."

"I'll do that, but I don't expect your men will act

without orders from yourself. You needn't hurry though we're going. Ask the cook for anything you require."

Mr. Hornsby, the parson, and Tom walked down to the camp again, and soon after the parson's buggy was ready for the road, a box of assaying materials being safely packed on board for transit to Crocodile Crossing.

"I think we had better ride ahead, parson," said Mr. Hornsby. "I'll get Mike O'Flannigan's horse for Tom, it's another flier, and we'll get out to the Crossing in quick time——"

"You can't get Mike's horse, boss," grunted Dave, saddling Mr. Hornsby's own steed; "he went out some time afore daylight to gather in the camp horses an' hasn't got back yet."

"Oh, I suppose they will have gone over to the big water-hole, or else the wind is blowing the sound of their bells away from him. Was he riding?"

"I reckon he was, boss; at least his own horse was in the yard last night, by some piece o' luck for him, an' it aint there now."

"You are surely not anxious about Mike?" the parson said; "he is a good bushman, and couldn't get bushed anywhere in the Gulf country."

"I am not anxious," spoke Mr. Hornsby thoughtfully; "I am merely wondering in which direction Mike went, and if I have done right in giving that trooper a horse after all."

"Mike would go south, boss," said Peter the Poet; "he knew the horses were in that line, for we all heard their bells last night."

"When did he leave camp?"

"No one knows. He was away before we got up, that's all we know."

"It's mighty like as though a new rush was startin' down south," Dave muttered; "the population is gettin' thick that way anyhow. Maybe Mike an' Chillagoe Charlie will run into one another—Howling—I mean—Where, tell me where, is my Highland laddie gone——?"

"Shut up, Dave," growled Dirty Sam, looking up from his work of cleaning his rifle; "Mike is not a Highland laddie."

"I know that, ye—ye—By Killarney's lakes and streams. Can't ye see that I was swearing that time? That was a hymn."

"You should always sing them, Dave," the parson advised; "the boys couldn't make any mistake then, and you would have a splendid revenge."

"What brilliant idea called for emphatic language in any case, Dave?" asked Mr. Hornsby. "Let us hear it, quick, for we must get away."

"It's mighty hard to tell it without a few swears, boss, answered Dave. "Say, parson, let me have only one minute's backslidin' an' I'll sing a whole book of hymns——?"

"Not a second, Dave," the parson said; "but if it is so difficult for you to tell what you think, I'll do it for you and you can simply correct my mistakes. It has suddenly struck you as strange that all the fast horses should be away, including the trooper's; that Chillagoe Charlie went south on the sergeant's flier, that Mike went in the same direction with his own, and that now the troopers are themselves following on the next best——"

"Go on, parson, ye're a mighty good thought-reader," cried Dave. "Them's my ideas exactly."

"I see," said Mr. Hornsby; "in fact, it might have been Mike the men at work saw riding past——"

"And Mike who took the sergeant's togs?" cried Ginger Bob in delight with the idea.

"I don't think that, though. The man who did that left a message behind, and it is not Mike's writing. Besides, he had his own horse."

"I'll bet my saddle that it is Mike's tracks the troopers are following now," said Peter the Poet.

"No," Mr. Hornsby mused aloud; "the sergeant knows his own horse too well for that."

"Snakes! boys," exclaimed Tommy the Kangaroo, who had been tempering some drills at the forge, "if we keep on talking we'll make out that Mike is Chillagoe Charlie."

"He might be," admitted Hungry Ted, who had been assisting him; "Mike never told any one much of his thoughts."

"All that is rot," said Dirty Sam. "Mike and I have slept in the same tent for many months and he's as straight a man as could be."

"But Chillagoe Charlie, from all accounts, acts on the square," the parson observed.

"There's nothing in the affair at all," said Mr. Hornsby. "Get on board with the parson, Tom, and we'll clear out. The troopers won't follow Mike very far."

"I am inclined to think they will," said the parson, taking his seat and picking up the reins; "I do not think Charlie would ride openly past the mines, and leave tracks which any one could follow, unless he had some reason for so doing."

"But the troopers will follow the tracks and get him," cried Peter the Poet. "And you said they would follow Mike."

"And I venture to think I am right. The sergeant knows the tracks of his own horse and will run it

down. You may be assured that Charlie knows that much also, and deliberately rode through sand patches to leave traces.

"But where does Mike come in, parson?" asked Dave. "How will they follow Mike if they know the horse so well? They will soon see they're on the wrong trail."

"I don't think so," said the parson quietly. "You see, in my opinion, Mike and Charlie changed horses."

"There is a happy land!" ejaculated Dave. "That's what I was trying to work out all along."

"You should have been a detective, parson," laughed Mr. Hornsby, as they prepared to depart. "You are at least equal to Sherlock Holmes."

The men were silent; the points of the case were slowly dawning upon them, and they were piecing together other little matters which had received no attention at the time of their occurrence, but which now were of significance.

Mr. Hornsby lingered behind after the buggy had left to give instructions to the men, and then rode after it. "You are being rushed into big things pretty suddenly, Tom," he said, as he came alongside. "Chillagoe Charlie your first night, and the mystery of this rush the next day."

"And a good bit more to follow," added the parson, "before he's done with the Gulf country."

Tom made no reply. He was thinking a little too.

Early in the afternoon they reached the crossing where the rush was in full swing.

"Where are the troopers stationed here just now?" asked Mr. Hornsby of two miners who knew him and had come forward to take charge of his horse.

"They left this morning, boss, to go west after Chillagoe Charlie," one replied.

"What! is he in the west now?" mused Mr. Hornsby. "He is certainly a remarkable traveller."

"Yes, their boss came out at sunrise this mornin' an' sent them off. He told them to ride like a cyclone, for Chillagoe Charlie had been seen at White Downs station."

"Come, parson, unravel this for us now," said Mr. Hornsby, as they walked along the line of reef, having left their belongings in charge of the two miners. "The only boss the troopers here could have is the sergeant who lost his clothes and his horse in our camp. How on earth could he be here at sunrise to-day?"

"He wasn't. The man who borrowed his garments impersonated him so that he could send the troopers west."

"I see; but won't that game be stopped when the sergeant comes up with Mike?"

"He won't come up with Mike; he'll likely find his horse all the same, but by that time you may be certain that he'll be informed that a trooper is galloping furiously past White Downs cattle station. He'll naturally think that that trooper is the man who stole his clothes——"

"But there were two troopers, parson?"

"Well, do you think that the man who arranged the whole affair didn't know that? I expect if you rode out on the west track just now you'd find one with a lame horse or something else that would prevent him from having any further interest in the chase."

"Therefore you say the sergeant and all his satellites will soon be chasing one of their own fellows thinking it is Chillagoe Charlie."

"I am of that opinion."

"And Charlie, meanwhile? Where do you think he is?"

"I don't think he is very far away; and while the road is blocked east, and they are hunting him south and west, he will leisurely ride north. Of course, all this is only my opinion."

"Of course," said Mr. Hornsby; "but it is not a parson you were cut out for."

"Perhaps not," agreed the parson. "But let us banish Charlie now. Here is where Tom should shine. What do you make of that, Tom? That apparently is the great reef which occasioned this rush."

CHAPTER IV

THE RUSH AT CROCODILE CROSSING, AND AFTER

THE main reef stretched east and west in a gigantic outcropping mass, from which detached boulders had been thrown, or had rolled, many feet away on either side. The material of which the reef was formed was dark grey in appearance with specks of green spread over its surface. And there certainly was plenty of it, for it extended down into the river and up the slope on the other side. But there was no chance of being able to peg out a claim anywhere along the main line, all the ground was held already, and it was in land pegged in by one of the miners whom Mr. Hornsby knew, that the party had begun their investigations.

"You don't seem enthusiastic, Tom," said that gentleman, as Tom chipped off a piece of the stuff and examined it closely. "What metal is the thing made of?"

"I can't tell you exactly until I assay it," Tom answered slowly. "But—but this is not the same as the samples I have assayed so often; it looks to me like a compound of arsenic and iron, and if it is, it can have no commercial value so far away from the coast as this."

"No; arsenical iron, or, for that part, any ore carry-

ing arsenic, is not worth looking at," said Mr. Hornsby. "It can't be smelted efficiently, and the cost of treatment out here would be enormous."

"What will ye give us for our claims, boss?" one of the miners who owned the ground on which they stood, asked. "I reckon Bill an' me have as good a show here as is on the field."

"Yes," agreed the parson, "the reef is big enough in your claims. I should say that if it goes down at all you have thousands of tons of that stuff within your pegs. What is it?"

"Why, copper, of course. Haven't you heard the reports of the assays?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hornsby; "but that stuff is not the same as the samples sent for assay. I rode along here yesterday and got a piece of the real thing where the reef had been shot away, but I am beginning to be afraid that I was meant to find it."

"Centipedes! boss," exclaimed the two miners, "if it weren't that we know ye is straight clean through we would think ye war' tryin' to skeer us off our ground so that you could jump it."

"My men, I hope for your sakes that I am wrong, but here is an assayer getting his plant ready; bring along what you call a fair sample of that stuff and we'll see it run through. If it turns out to be copper or anything of value, I'll buy your claims."

All the men in the adjoining claims had now gathered round, for Mr. Hornsby and the parson were known and respected by most of those present, and they all knew that no advantage would be taken of their ignorance as to the ore their claims held.

Tom crushed the specimen brought to him and passed the resultant powder through a fine sieve. Then he carefully weighed out ten grains with the

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perfect little glass-cased balance which the parson had already mounted and levelled for him. Several times he weighed out the same amount, putting each sample into a little porcelain vessel, which, after adding some nitric acid to its contents, he placed among the hot ashes of the fire upon which the two miners had previously boiled their midday billy of tea. In each case pungent red fumes arose instantly and continued to come off the combination for about ten minutes, when the now almost boiling fluid settled down into a seething green liquid. Tom then added some water from one of the miners' water-bags and soon after lifted the first crucible from the fire and poured its contents into a wide-mouthed pickle-bottle which he had found lying near. "This test is to determine the copper percentage," he said, and the great crowd of men who had by this time gathered waited anxiously and silently. He added more water, until the fluid was of a very faint green colour, and then measured off some ammonia from a bottle and poured it in also. A cry of dismay went up from all the watchers; the fluid had undergone little change, only becoming a deeper green in colour, whereas if copper had been present at all, as every man knew, it would have become deep blue. Tom shook the bottle and waited a minute. "I am afraid there is no copper here at all, sir," he then said to Mr. Hornsby. "That seems to be a precipitate of iron coming down now in that reddish feathery mass." He pulled his knife from his pocket and dipped the blade into the solution for a moment. "No, there is no copper in that stuff," he said as he withdrew his knife and examined the shining steel. "It hasn't even left a trace on my knife-blade, so I need not go on to apply cyanide of potassium from my burette."

"No, you needn't, Tom," said Mr. Hornsby; "there's not enough copper in a mile of that reef to make a halfpenny."

"Then what is the confounded thing made of, boss? It must be something good or it wouldn't be rushed?" cried a man from the crowd.

"Here, try this piece," spoke an evil-eyed person pushing up to Tom. "I'll bet free drinks you'll get copper in that."

"I have no doubt he would, Mr. O'Brian," said Mr. Hornsby. "That is a piece of the stuff that was placed convenient for me to find, and bits of which were sent all down the line."

"Well, aint it copper? What more do you want? If that stuff is here our ground is worth——"

"That is all right; but you know very well that all that is here of that stuff was brought here. Why, I recognise it now. That is a piece of Tate River ore, I know it well."

"Boys, he's one of them blamed company men. He's a mine manager an' wants to sicken ye off the ground so that he can jump it for his bloated money-grabbers in London," roared Mr. O'Brian. "This is a labour country," he continued, working himself into a passion; "are we to be swindled out of our rights by an eye-glassed, top-booted, collar an' cuff swell like him——?"

"You just shut up, O'Brian, or I'll tell the boys something I happen to know of you and your swindling ways. You did well to use that word, you're pretty familiar with the practice—— No, don't come nearer or you'll regret it. Kick him out, boys, until we see if there is any other metal in this ore."

The men had no love for Mr. O'Brian, and cheerfully carried out Mr. Hornsby's orders. O'Brian was

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one of a number of saloon owners who somehow held all the valuable land in every rush and who practically controlled the chief working mines in the country by reason of their holding the bulk of the shares. There were quite a crowd of this kind among the men of the Crocodile Crossing rush, and in all cases they had pegged out leases along the line of reef and posted application notices on their number one peg. O'Brian went off to consult with them, for, strangely enough, they did not seem eager to know the result of an assay on the spot, and had kept away from the honest miners who had gathered round Tom.

And now Tom was testing for silver. Taking up another of the porcelain beakers, he poured the hot nitric acid solution into his cleansed pickle-bottle, and after diluting and cooling with water, he added, drop by drop, some hydrochloric acid. A white precipitate at once began to fall and the onlookers shouted with delight.

"It's silver!" they yelled, "an' rich!"

"Or lead, or cinnabar," a tall, black-whiskered prospector corrected; "wait till we see if it turns black when it sees the sunlight."

Well the men present, all experienced prospectors, knew what his words meant; for although few, if any, of them could have put an assay through themselves, they all knew that all silver precipitates turn black on exposure to sunlight.

But this one did not. Tom held the bottle up and there was at least no doubt of the sunlight.

"Shake it," advised some one; "maybe the silver doesn't like comin' out in the cold."

"Here, mates," cried a little man excitedly, "some of ye say it's turnin' black. Don't let the rush be a duffer."

"But it aint turnin' black, Jack," said a miner standing beside Tom; "an' I'll bet the time I've lost comin' here that this rush is another of those frauds the shanty keepers have engineered."

Tom decanted the fluid and poured boiling water from a billy on to the white precipitate. Instantly it was dissolved, leaving not a trace behind. "It is lead," he announced; "lead salts are soluble in hot water."

"But lead won't pay working expenses out here," the tall, black-whiskered prospector said. "Can you try the stuff for gold, lad? maybe ye'll get that."

Tom looked at Mr. Hornsby for instructions, but that gentleman said, "It's a long test, Tom, and I hardly think you need trouble. Gold has never been found in such a combination as that. Tell the men the metals of which you think the reef is composed. I'm going to interview Messrs. O'Brian and company."

He walked away, and most of the men also left. They had no further interest in anything. Crocodile Crossing was only another of those mysteriously organised rushes which could never prove of any good to the honest, hard-working miner. Tom told those remaining that the formation consisted of iron, lead, arsenic, and silica, with traces perhaps of silver and other metals. This was a hopeless combination, and every one was aware of that fact; they had by their frantic rushing to the spot helped to boom the rush; they guessed some people would gain thereby, but not them, and sadly they prepared to pack up their belongings and depart to seek employment at some of the working mines nearer Murgoona.

"If I knew the man who started this rush, I'd see that he wasn't able to start any more for some time,"

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growled one big miner ; " I left a good billet down the line for this scramble, an' I've spent all the money I've been saving in buying horses an' tools for it."

" We're all in the same position," chorussed the men ; " we've been fooled again."

" No more rushes for me," said the black-whiskered man ; " but who in thunder is working to gain out of this one ? Boys, let us wait and see. We'll then know who we have to thank for booming a copper show that only carries the copper they brought to it."

" Men," cried O'Brian at this stage, " gather round here while I tell you something. This new chum mine manager of Caledonia Camp is bluffing you all."

" Roll up, boys," cried another of O'Brian's fraternity ; " we are Ostralyans, and we won't have white-faced Johnnies like him bossing us. We'll send him home to his mother along with the kid he's got to fake the assays."

" There aint no fake about them," responded a miner gruffly ; " an' it strikes me we now know who we've to pay for this rush——"

" Men," roared yet another of the men with O'Brian, a well-known publican in Murgooona, " we won't see you beat, we'll stand by you. Don't believe a word of what the new chum dude says. What does he know about copper, and how could he run Caledonia Mines if it weren't for Jim Smith who acts as boss for him ?"

A murmur expressive of doubt ran through the crowd, and the men congregated around the band of shanty keepers. Mr. Hornsby, meanwhile, had lit a cigarette, and Tom, left alone, had gone on testing for the presence of other minerals.

" Let there be no quarrelling, boys," spoke the parson ; " whatever the results of this rush may be,

remember that we are all British, whether born in the home islands, or under the Southern Cross. A Briton does not complain when he loses, any more than he shouts when he wins. There are better things to be striven for than copper, too——"

"No preaching here, parson," roared a miner; "we're not in a mood to stand it."

"We all know about the better treasures upstairs," laughed O'Brian; "but we can't get any advance on that security, and anyhow a mine in the present is worth a round dozen when we are dead——"

"I had no intention of preaching to you, boys," interrupted the parson; "I was about to remark that as copper was so low-priced in the market just now——"

"That you had all better go home and pray for the price to rise, like good little Sunday-school boys," laughed O'Brian sarcastically. "Go away at once now or the parson will bring a whale to swallow you——"

"If you interrupt me again, O'Brian, I'll punch your head. As I was saying, men——"

"You'll punch my head!" broke in the astonished O'Brian. "You sleeky, overfed sky-pilot, do you know that there's not a man in Queensland could do that? Snakes! centipedes! and tarantulas! What is free Ostralya coming to when——?" He stopped and walked over to the parson threateningly.

"You lie, in addition to your other sins, remarked the parson coolly; "and as I don't, see how you like that—and that." His left fist first shot out, then his right, and both came in violent contact with O'Brian's face. That person promptly fell to the ground, and a cheer arose from the men. The parson had kept his word.

"Here, parson, I'll take your place," spoke the tall

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prospector, pushing forward ; " I know you can easily look after yourself, but we miners haven't come down so far as to stand by and see a parson having to fight for himself."

" Good old parson ! " shouted the men ; " we'll all take his place."

" There is no need, my men. O'Brian has got all he wants for some time. Now, will you listen to what I have to say——?"

" No don't, boys," cried one of the group of publicans ; " listen to me first. I am going to talk down on bed-rock——"

" I really shouldn't like to soil my hands upon that caricature of a face you possess," interrupted Mr. Hornsby ; " but I'll use the whip in the parson's buggy on your carcase if you break in on my friend again."

" I am quite willing to allow him to speak first," the parson said ; " say what you have to say, Dunsmore ; I'll talk to the men afterwards."

" Boys, go back to your claims," cried Dunsmore, " and sit tight on them. We'll guarantee each claim holder will be glad he hasn't chucked his ground before night. And don't believe what the kid says about there being no copper here. What can he know about copper ? And anyhow, just look what three plugs of gelignite blew out of the reef in our ground. No man can say that isn't copper ore of the very highest grade, or he shows himself an idiot. Now, if it is in our ground——"

" That certainly is high-grade carbonate of copper," observed Mr. Hornsby, examining a heap of ore lying beside a hole that had been blown out of the reef. " It must have cost you a lot to bring it here, Dunsmore ; that stuff is peculiar to the Tate River

district. I know it well—in fact, I am almost sure I could tell you the exact spot in the Lady Mary mines outcrop it came from——”

“There aint any stuff like that in our shows anyhow,” said a man. “I’ll sell my claim to any fool that thinks differently for a fiver.”

His words seemed to express the thoughts of most of his comrades.

“Then, boys, listen,” continued Dunsmore. “We, my friends Smith, O’Brian, Robertson, Milson, Hetherington, and some others, are ready to make you a sporting offer. We’ll give every man of you a ten-pound note for his ground——”

“You will?” shouted all.

“Yes, on condition that he holds it for us until to-night and doesn’t tell any one that he has sold. Come now, men, if you are satisfied there is no copper in your shows, now is your chance.”

“What is the idea now, parson?” asked Mr. Hornsby. “That deal will cost them two or three hundred pounds. They must have something up their sleeve.”

“Oh, they simply wish to keep up the appearance of a booming rush until they can sell their shows to some speculative ignoramus whom they expect to arrive shortly. The train connecting with the boat from Sydney and Brisbane and all ports north thereof got in to Murgoona last night, you know——”

“What game have ye on anyhow?” demanded a man. “We know you too well, Dunsmore, to think ye have turned so blamed fond of throwing away money for nothing——”

“Then, confound you for a blooming fool; hang on to your ground yourself and do what you like with it. Get off our leases now, all who are not

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selling. We have no time for people who don't know their own minds."

"You bet I know my mind," cried one man; "give me that tenner. That's my ground second from here."

"Hold hard, men," cried the parson, who had been engaged in conversation with Tom while Dunsmore had been speaking. Tom had apparently grown disgusted with his tests and had joined the crowd.

"What's the racket now, parson?" cried some of the miners; "aren't we right in sellin' what aint of any good to us?"

"But don't you see that these people want your ground for some purpose of their own, but wish it to appear that you are all manning your own properties. Now, I haven't the money with me, but I'll promise to give every man who holds his ground for himself until to-night a ten-pound note if he desires to sell it then."

"Who is taking our money now?" sang out Dunsmore, jumping on an upturned box.

"And who wants to see me murder that fraud of a parson?" cried O'Brian, who had just recovered.

"I reckon we'll stick to our claims, boys," cried the tall prospector. "There is more in this business than is on top."

"Howling dingoes!" ejaculated a man; "see what's comin'!"

"It's another rush!" exclaimed another. "An', great centipedes! they're all new chums. Just look at their togs! They must have come up with the train last night."

"They're comin' here," yelled a miner. "I'll bet it is new chum speculators wantin' to buy property."

On came the cavalcade. There were over a dozen in front, riding horses which every one recognised as

belonging to the hotel keepers in Murgoona. Behind came sulkies and buggies, laden with people, mostly in garments which denoted a civilisation further south than the tropics. One man was perched upon the back of a camel, and not a few rode bicycles. A crowd of men running on foot came last ; these were miners and prospectors who had left their work, wherever it was, on seeing the others pass, and joined in the rush. As for the troopers, who ought to have been very much in evidence, there were none.

"Where is the reef?" cried the first rider as he came within shouting distance. "I am Clayson, of Charters Towers, and I'll buy up any show——"

"Give me a chance, too, boys," shouted several others ; "well pay cash down for good things."

"Come, Tom," said Mr. Hornsby ; "we can't afford to be mixed up in this. The story will be all over Queensland to-morrow, and I don't want it said that the manager of Caledonia Camp had anything to do with either buying or selling worthless claims."

"Just look at this, sir, first," said Tom, showing a bottle of a purple fluid. "That is what I got when I dissolved the ore in combined nitric and hydrochloric acids, and precipitated it with chloride of tin."

"Jupiter, Tom, that is——"

"Hush !" said the parson ; "let us boil a billy of tea over here and watch developments. I know some of these new people, and quite a number of them are as sharp as Messrs. O'Brian and Co."

And so it seemed. Claims showing the unmistakable copper ore were bought up at once by the excited newcomers. But they hung back when it came to dealing with the miners' claims ; there was nothing showing in them but the huge walls of the arsenical

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iron outcrop, and even a new chum from down south hesitated to give more than a sporting offer for such a prospect.

The publicans' leases soon changed hands. These were proved shows, for was not a fine green ore, which any schoolboy could see was copper, lying in heaps beside all the holes they had blown into the great reef. No one asked why they were selling such promising properties. No one ever asks reasons for anything in a big rush.

By sundown the men who had sold their claims had all departed for Murgooona, to hold high revelry in the saloons of that evil-smelling, stifling place. No saloon would close its doors that night. Those who had not been able to secure any ground had also left the field, some in disgust, but most to carry on ways that are dark and strange among the lucky miners in the township.

Mr. Hornsby was just thinking of departing also when a horseman galloped down the track and turned along the line of reef. He was leading a spare horse, and seemed in a great hurry.

"Why, that is Mike O'Flannigan," exclaimed the parson, apparently greatly surprised. "He must be looking for you."

"He hasn't lost much time on the road, at any rate," said Mr. Hornsby. "Look at the state his horse is in. What can be the matter?"

Just then Mike perceived his chief, and rode over. "Dirty Sam sent me to tell you that a mob of police troopers have stuck up our camp, sir," he said as he approached, "and he wants instructions. It's all Smith's doings. He tried to raise a strike among the men, and brought out the other two shifts so as to allow the mine to be flooded. Your own boys are

manning all the deep workings just now, but Dave fears they can't hold out all night without relief——"

"But to leave a mine without notice like that is criminal! Saddle my horse, Mike. What is Smith doing just now?"

"Living, but that is about all. Dirty Sam sailed into him, and there's not enough of him to make a funeral."

"Dear me! And the rest of the strikers?" Mr. Hornsby leaped into his saddle.

"Oh, we went for them, excepting one or two who took our side; they'll not be fit for work for a week. But hadn't you better keep away, boss? Give me your orders, and I'll gallop back on my fresh horse in half an hour."

"How can I stay away, man, with only one short-handed shift of men to keep the water down in the shaft, and troopers waiting to take them away as soon as they get the chance? Parson, excuse me; bring Tom along——"

"I beg your pardon, sir. The troopers are waiting on Chillagoe Charlie; they're all planted round the camp. We wouldn't have known but for that lad's dog, who nosed one fellow out. A couple of them chased me, expecting I was coming to warn you, and Sam and I both thought that—that——"

"But what on earth have I got to do with Chillagoe Charlie? It's the mines I am concerned about. Come on." He gave his horse the rein, and darted down upon the track. A cloud of dust rose around him as his noble animal broke into its full stride, but soon the fast-falling darkness enveloped everything in its folds. Mike still remained with the parson and Tom.

"Mike," said the parson, "leave me your horse; saddle one of my buggy horses for Tom—you'll find

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a saddle in the buggy—and ride back to camp as fast as you can. Tell Mr. Hornsby I'm remaining here for the night."

Without a word Mike flung a saddle on one of the parson's buggy horses, which had been hobbled near, and in a remarkably short space of time Tom and he were mounted.

"Can you ride?" Mike asked.

"Yes," replied Tom.

"Then ride like—like as if Chillagoe Charlie were after you." He drove his spurs into his still perspiring horse's flanks, and Tom followed him blindly, vaguely conscious that the animal he was astride was one that would not be far behind when the race was over.

Through the close, sultry air of night they rushed, the dust kicked up by Mr. Hornsby's steed, now far ahead, filling their nostrils.

"Fall in behind me," suddenly shouted Mike to Tom. "Give your horse free rein, and lie down on its back. We're going to take a short cut through the bush, and your horse knows the way."

Tom obeyed, and next moment Mike swerved off to the left and entered the scrub. How he could see Tom did not know. He had no time himself to look where his horse was taking him, even although there had been light enough for that purpose. The ride was a terrific one. Under the branches of trees which would have caught him if sitting up, over dry water-courses, down steep embankments, leaping fallen trunks and boulders, he was carried along literally on the wings of the wind, for the speed created a gentle breeze. At last they broke into a clearing, and thundering over an ironstone-shot plain, which drew sparks from the horses' hoofs in showers, they suddenly came in sight of the camp lights.

"Halt!" a voice shouted. "Halt, or I'll drop you!"

Tom looked up, and saw a trooper standing by his horse's head close beside them.

"Drop away, you sneaking skunk," shouted Mike in reply, and a minute after they were in the middle of the camp square.

Nigger and two other dogs ran out and greeted them effusively, but they had no time to respond. "The boss has been here," Mike cried. "I see his tracks; he gone over to the mine. Come on——"

"Just wait a bit," put in a voice. "I have orders to allow no one to leave this camp." A trooper's face loomed up at Mike's bridle-rein.

Mike swung his horse round with a jerk, and withdrawing his foot from his stirrup at the same time, he kicked out at the man viciously.

"You have orders!" he roared. "You can have Queensland if you like; but I'll knock blazes out of the man who puts a hand on my horse."

He rode furiously down the track leading to the mine, and once more Tom followed, Nigger also running behind.

"Here we are, boss. What can we do?" Mike sang out, as they came up and saw Mr. Hornsby, still in the saddle, directing some operations. They dismounted at once.

"Nothing, Mike," the manager said sadly. "The pumps won't work, and the boys can't keep on bailing with buckets and a windlass."

Mike and Tom sprang to the windlass, which had been hastily erected over the shaft mouth, and relieved Bullocky Bill and Dirty Sam, who had been toiling at its creaking handles for hours past in an attempt to keep the rising water from flooding the workings until



"MIKE . . . KICKED OUT AT THE MAN VICIOUSLY."

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their comrades had timbered the drives underneath so that they would not fall in when the water reached them. The two men drew their grimy hands across their steaming faces the moment they were relieved. They were blinded with perspiration, but had not been able to let go the handles to clear their eyes.

"My word, boss," smiled Bullocky Bill, "this is a fine country for keeping warm in." He stuck a fresh candle in the bottle which served as a candlestick, and placed it in a better position for giving light.

"Get below, Bullocky," cried Dirty Sam. "We can give a hand there." The two men clambered over the edge of the shaft, and feeling with their feet for the ladders, went below to help their comrades in the airless, poisonous regions underneath.

Suddenly Tom called out, "I know what is wrong with the engines and pumps, sir ; I see by the water we're hauling up."

"I doubt they've taken care that we can't repair anything that is wrong, Tom. They have committed a crime in leaving the mine, and wouldn't stop short of another such an easy one as wrecking the engines."

"No, sir ; the engines and pumps are all right, I am sure," persisted Tom eagerly. "It is the boiler that requires attention. I saw the same thing done at a strike in Sydney."

"But the pumps only make a lather, and don't draw water at all."

"I know, sir ; they have put soft soap in the boiler, and the steam from that only condenses and chokes the plungers."

Mr. Hornsby jumped off his horse and took Tom's place at the windlass. "Go on Tom," he said ; "see if you can do anything."

Tom ran to the boiler which supplied steam to the

winding and ventilating engines, and also to the pumps. It was now cold, for the men had ceased using it hours ago. Uncoupling some pipes, he caused the water to drain out, then he unscrewed the manhole door, and, lighting a candle, looked in. It was as he had thought ; the lower part of the steam-drum was filled with a spongy mass of foam-like stuff, and all the pipes leading to and from the boiler were clogged with the same substance. Everywhere a greasy coat of slime had been spread by the action of the steam dissolving the soap and casting it over all contact surfaces, and Tom could imagine what the working parts of the pump deep down in the shaft would be like. He hastily procured an old discarded billy and lifted out the bulk of the slimy mass, then with a mop made of a bundle of ore-bags he cleansed the sides and the internal pipes as well as he could see to do.

"I think everything will work now, sir," he called out to Mr. Hornsby at the windlass. "Shall I rekindle the fire?" He closed the manhole door and began connecting up all the pipes as he spoke.

"Yes, if you can. Throw some tins of kerosene on the wood you use to hasten it, and fill the boiler from that gravitation tank."

"I know, sir," Tom answered, allowing the boiler to be charged with water by means of a pipe connected with a large tank mounted on a high wooden framework. He then set the fires going, shut off the gravitation water, and saw that everything else was in order. Tom was not an engineer, but his father had been one of the most famous mechanics of his time, and perhaps Tom inherited some knowledge of the science instinctively. And the needle on the face of the steam gauge began to move.

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"Steam will be ready in another twenty minutes," Tom called out, when everything was working right. "Will you please tell the men below to open the exhausts of the pump so as to allow the steam to clean out the cylinders?"

"Can't do that, my lad. The men are suffering enough down there without turning the steam on them. I am not sure, either, if any of them know where the exhaust-valve is, nor what it is——"

A sound as of a number of horses galloping broke in on Mr. Hornsby's words. "That will be those confounded trooper fellows," he muttered, listening. "I knew I rode over one or two to-night, and they'll be coming for my blood now."

But it was not the troopers. It was a number of the miners from Crocodile Crossing, and among them was the tall, black-whiskered prospector. "Where is the boss of the camp?" this man said, as the riders drew up beside Tom. It was dark, and they could not distinguish the forms of the two men at the windlass.

"I am here," called out Mr. Hornsby; "but if you have anything to say to me you'll have to come up and say it here. I am busy."

"And I am right sorry to see that," cried the tall prospector, sliding from his horse and running up the dump to the mouth of the shaft. "We heard of the dirty trick that skunk Smith played on you—he never was anything more than a publican's agent, anyhow—and we've come along to see if we can pull you through."

"What!" gasped the mine manager in amazement. "Do you mean to tell me that you fellows are willing to work for the Caledonia Company?"

"No, boss, we don't care a shandygaff for the

Caledonia Company, but we're straight men, and we're here to help a straight boss. Give me that handle——"

"But your claims at the rush? You will have abandoned them?"

"Well, that won't make much difference. The parson told us that if we came here in time to man the mines before the damage was done that he would put us on to something better, and here we are. Spit out your orders, and let us get to work. Our horses can be hobbled until morning."

"Men," cried Mr. Hornby, much moved, "you have come in time to save this mine. If it had been flooded my name and reputation would have gone for ever, for people in the Old Country don't know anything about the joys of a mine manager's life in happy Queensland. I am grateful to you, boys, and I shall not forget——"

"Hallo, below! Dirty Sam and Bullocky Bill!" A man shouted down the shaft. All had now come up, having removed the saddles and bridles from their steeds and hobbled their fore-feet.

"Hallo!" floated faintly from the depths.

"Come up; we're the relieving shift, we're ready to go on now——"

"And the man of you who shows a face down here will never show it on top again," came like a whisper on a gentle breeze, although Dirty Sam had bellowed the words forth with all his lung power.

"They think you are some of the other shift," Mike intimated, and one of the men lay over the shaft and roared, "You cranky ole drill jumper, doesn't ye know who is speakin' to ye? We is not your old mates, we is Long Tom an' Little Billy an' Sailor George an' Scottie an' me, an' Harry the Hustler, an—oh, blame ye—a lot more. Come up at once."

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But Mike had gone down in the last bucket and explained, and a shout of welcome below cut short the miner's speech.

Next minute the tired, grimy, hungry, and thirsty toilers began to emerge from the shaft's mouth, each following the other up the long ladder way. "Mates, I am mighty glad to see ye," were Psalm Singing Dave's first words. He walked to the edge of the dump and picking up his shirt (no man wears such an article of dress down a North Queensland copper mine) he wiped the salt sweat from his eyes. He then seized a water-bag hanging on a peg sunk into the dump, and gave it his best attention until Hungry Ted pulled it from him. Dirty Sam meanwhile gave some instructions to the tall prospector, whom evidently he knew very well, and the relief party stripped and prepared to go below.

Just then a slim stripped figure rushed up the dump. "There is now enough steam to work the pumps," it cried, addressing Mr. Hornsby; "I'll go down and open the exhausts to allow the steam to cleanse everything."

"Git away over to the camp an' help the cook," laughed some one. "This aint no forlorn hope business that needs a boy hero to show men their duty."

Mr. Hornsby looked at the youthful volunteer for a moment. "All right, Tom," he said. "We'll both go down. Lower away, lads, and see that Tom is put safely into the bucket when it comes up again."

He swung himself clear of the shaft walls, one foot in the bucket, and the other free for steering purposes, and strong arms kept the windlass in check as its barrel paid out with his weight. Soon the signal was given that he had reached bottom, and the bucket was hauled up speedily for Tom.

"Here, kid, was you ever down a shaft before?" a miner asked.

"No," answered Tom, getting into the bucket as he had seen Mr. Hornsby do; "but I must learn how to go down sometime."

"I reckon there will be a funeral here to-morrow," the miner continued. "Why can't some of us do? I don't like standing by an' seeing work being made for an inquest."

"Shut up!" ordered Dirty Sam. "The lad is full of grit, and could go down hand over hand if it came to the point. The engineer went on strike to-day with the others, and it is his dirty work that the lad is putting right. None of us know anything about the job, or we would all go."

Before Sam had finished explaining Tom was standing beside the mine manager on a platform near the bottom. Mr. Hornsby had a lighted candle in his hand, and as its flickering light lit up his surroundings Tom saw that he was standing on some planks built into the walls of the shaft, at a point where two dark tunnels were driven into the black glistening ore of the lode. The pump was fixed in a corner of the platform, and from it a long suction-pipe dropped into a dark flood of bubbling water fast rising beneath them. The temperature in that airless hole was as that of an oven, and already Tom was blinded with perspiration. Groping for the pump exhausts he opened them, noting meanwhile that the water was literally rushing up to them.

"I am going to turn on the steam, sir," he cried. "Hadn't you better climb up the ladder a bit? It will be hot here."

"Yes, I believe it will, Tom," Mr. Hornsby responded, "but I am going to stay here with you."

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A hissing cloud of steam poured through the open exhausts into the shaft, completely blinding the two men, and raising the temperature to what most people would call unbearable heat.

"How long will this last, Tom?" Mr. Hornsby's voice cried through the swirling vapour cloud.

"I am groping for the valve to shut it off now, sir," Tom cried in return.

"Hallo!" came from above. "Have ye broke through into Jimmy Squarefoot's dining-room? The steam is gushing out like as if ye had lifted the lid off his billy can——"

"Whew! This makes a fool of a Turkish bath," said Mr. Hornsby. "I hope you can find that valve soon, Tom."

"Here's a mob of troopers come up round the shaft, boss," a voice came down again. "What will we do?"

"Pitch them down the shaft," roared Mr. Hornsby savagely.

"All right; Dirty Sam has hauled one off his horse. Look out, below, he'll be there in a second!"

"No, no, keep him on top until we get up," yelled the worried manager, and at that moment the steam was shut off.

"Do you think the pump will work now, Tom?"

"I think so, sir. There must have been a lot of soap blown out, for my eyes are dropping out with the lather that is in them."

By Jupiter! I'll take it out of these policemen on top for this, Tom."

"But it is not their fault, sir; they didn't bring about the strike."

"No, but their confounded presence here at this time is enough to drive me mad. They and their Chillagoe Charlies——"

"I am going to start the pump, sir—— Hallo ! the steam is clearing away, and it is getting quite cool."

"Some one has got the ventilating engine and fan started. I wasn't aware the Caledonia Company possessed a man of such foresight."

"The pumps are working. I hear the plungers forcing the water up."

"I hope so, Tom. If not, this mine is as good as abandoned, for man power can never overtake that flood now. The Walsh River must have broken in on us——"

"Yes, they're working," persisted Tom ; "I can feel the throb in the pipes."

A cheer was wafted down from above, then a powerful voice cried, "The water is coming out here more than a mile a minute, boss."

"Get into the bucket, Tom, you've saved the mine," said Mr. Hornby, with a sigh of relief. "And now I'm ready for troopers, Chillagoe Charlies, or anything."

"Won't you go first, sir ?"

"No, I won't; your future is in my hands henceforth, and if harm comes your way it will have to pass me first. Heave away, boys. Man on board."

Two minutes later the two half-parboiled human beings were being rubbed down by ready hands.

"My ! boss, your togs are ruined now," cried Ginger Bob.

"Yes, Ginger, you can have them ; I really forgot I had any clothes on. But where are these pests, the troopers ?"

"Helping to lower timber into No. 2 shaft," said Dirty Sam, "and their boss is working that ventilating plant."

Mr. Hornsby walked down to where the engine was running, and beheld a man in the dress of police superintendent working around it with an oil can.

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"Sir, I thank you," began the mine manager. "You started that just in time."

"No thanks are necessary, sir ; I was a Tyneside engineer before I came out here and turned policeman, and when I heard that you were down that shaft fooling about with steam exhausts, of course I had to do something to save you, and I blew the steam through the engine and started it."

"Well, I am grateful——"

"I don't know that you should be. I wanted you alive so as to show you that I am not always such a fool as you found me the day I landed at Murgoona."

"I hardly understand you. Come over to the house, and after I change my clothes we'll have dinner."

"Afterwards, perhaps, but in the meantime, Chil-lagoe Charlie, I arrest you in the name of the law, and as is the custom I warn you not to give yourself away by saying anything."

The officer laid a hand on Mr. Hornsby's shoulder and with his other held out a document. "Here is the warrant," he said. "So we are square now, Charlie."

"How very melodramatic !" Mr. Hornsby yawned. "Come over and have dinner."

CHAPTER V

THE MIDNIGHT RIDERS

“WELL, Mr. Superintendent, are you not afraid to dine with such a notorious personage as I am supposed to be ? Why haven't you your revolver on the table beside you ? And why didn't you order your men to surround the house ? Let me help you to some of this wild turkey ; I shot it myself down on the river yesterday.”

“Thanks ; I feel a square meal would do me good. I am not afraid to dine with you, because in the warrant murder has not been laid to your charge ; and although you tricked me so neatly the other night, I consider that if I were not able to hold my own, man to man, I have no right to wear this uniform—but I heard a knock at the door.”

“Come in, Tom ; take that chair over there ; but first permit me to introduce you to the police superintendent of the north country. He has just done me the honour of telling me that I am Chillagoe Charlie. This lad is Tom Willoughby, sir ; in a way he is my *protégé* ; and now that we all know each other let us proceed with the mercies the Gulf country provides. I am sorry that my friend the parson is not here, he is a good entertainer, which I fear I am not. But Tom is too amazed to speak, I see.

He wasn't aware of the double identity with which you credit me, although he saw Charlie at pistol range last night. You might tell him some of my supposed exploits."

"I only know them second-hand, Charlie—I beg pardon, I mean——"

"Charlie is my name. We'll waive the familiarity. Go on."

"Well, you know I really belong to the Southern Division, and it was only recently that I was sent up here to organise the pursuit of the clever gentleman who was sticking up banks everywhere, stealing the gold from the batteries of the leading mines, robbing hotels, and in fact doing anything and everything short of murder, although I believe there are ugly rumours afloat concerning his connection with the disappearance of a number of men. I must say I thought the stories about you—I mean the gentleman's prowess greatly exaggerated until I came up to Murgoona. There I changed my mind. You did it very neatly, and I must say considerably, sir."

"I am glad you think so. Let us have your version of the story. I heard from my men to-day the trooper sergeant's yarn."

"Why, you know all about it. When I retired to my room in that den of an hotel I found a note pinned to my pillow informing me that the person I had expressed a desire to meet was sleeping behind the dump of an abandoned shaft of a certain mine. I, of course, saw that my weapons were in working order and set out for the place mentioned, having received full directions from the hotel-keeper. Well, I found the abandoned shaft, and sure enough a man was lying beside it asleep,

a mask hiding his face. I could hardly believe my luck. Here was the great Charlie, helpless, probably poisoned by some firewater he had been foolish enough to drink. Great would be the fame of my name. I bent over the man, and just then a pair of arms, which I must say were a good deal stronger than yours look, caught me round the waist and threw me. 'If you make a sound it will be your last,' the owner of the arms said. 'You have been tricked, for that is Goggle Eyed Hawk lying there, and I am the man you wanted to meet.'

"'I would much rather postpone the interview,' I managed to say, at which he laughed. I could not see his face because of the mask, and the voice was evidently disguised. 'I'll not harm you,' the man said, 'nor will I tell any one of this, but it is essential that I should have all these papers you are carrying.'

"'But they're in my room,'" I explained before he gagged me.

"'Oh, that doesn't matter in the slightest, I'll get them there. I'll tie you now so that you can't get into town, unless you roll in, before morning; and I should not advise rolling because of snakes, and holes in the ground, and other things. I'll see that you are relieved as soon as is safe for me, so try and sleep the night away.' He was quite gentlemanly about the way he worked, and wished me good-night when he left. I need not say I didn't sleep, but I realised the hopelessness of rolling or jumping into town, and passed the time in evolving a scheme for his capture. I was found and released about breakfast-time yesterday. I put my plan in action, and it has been successful even sooner than I expected. Your mind

doesn't take elementary things into account, sir, a common fault with our cleverest law-break—ahem! —people."

"Very interesting. You have only made one trifling mistake, Mr. Superintendent."

"I am not aware of it. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing much. Only you have caught the wrong man."

The officer smiled. "I don't think so," he said. "I did not see Charlie's face, as I have already said, but I am old enough to know how to make use of my powers of observation."

"Indeed? Won't you give us the benefit of them? Try some of this pigeon-pie. My cook is an expert in pigeon-pies; I would not part with him for anything."

"No?" said the officer thoughtfully. "But I am afraid he can't very well accompany you——"

"Quite easily, my dear fellow; those Japanese can go wherever we go. But you haven't explained how you ran your man down?"

The officer looked curiously at his host before speaking. "You seem to be greatly amused," he said at length, "but I tell you, it is always the small ignored trifles that trip up a man of genius. Have you ever taken any particular notice of this before?" He carefully unfolded a crumpled page of a newspaper and handed it to Mr. Hornsby. "I must ask you to promise on your honour not to destroy anything," he said.

"What! Would you trust to the honour of Chillagoe Charlie?"

"Well, I find the gentleman a very decent fellow, and I don't see why I shouldn't."

"All right, I won't damage your evidence in any way.

This appears to be a page from the *Cairns Argus*. Can't say I have seen that paper for over a week now. What has Sherlock Holmes discovered in this?"

"That was the gag left in my mouth."

"Indeed? I would never have dreamt that your mouth was large enough to hold all that."

"And there lying on that chair is its companion page. If you will examine it I have no doubt you will see that you were slightly thoughtless—Ah! you appreciate my words now?"

Mr. Hornsby's face had suddenly changed. "Get that paper, Tom," he said. "Yes, your powers of observation are wonderfully accurate," he said to the officer. "This is undoubtedly a piece of the same paper, one can see that by the way the two pages join where they were torn across, but I fail to grasp that you can call that evidence for or against anything. Any one could tear a paper in two, stuff one part into a man's mouth, and accidentally or with design leave the other part here——" He paused abruptly. He had caught Tom's eye, and read the meaning the look implied.

"Just so," the Superintendent said. "Here is a piece of the cord with which I was bound." He handed over a length of cord, and again Mr. Hornsby's face expressed dismay.

"Well," he asked, "what does the cord tell? It looks a very ordinary thing."

"Your face shows you know differently. This is a cord not known in Queensland—I happen to be an expert in cords—it is a special tough variety manufactured in Greenock in Scotland, and on inquiry by telegraph to Cairns this morning I find you paid duty on a consignment imported from Greenock last week."

"I don't deny that. It is a waterproof cord that we use for signalling purposes in the mines, and the Company sent it out at my request. But you surely cannot think that that means anything. Any chance passer-by could pick up yards of it anywhere round the mines."

"Possibly, but I don't think your argument is convincing. Here's another link. He produced a piece of stiff paper. "This is a pattern of the imprint my friend's foot left in the sand," he said. "You will observe, I have no doubt, from the shape that it was an English-make boot he was wearing, such as you have on your foot at this moment. You would object, I suppose, to my trying this pattern on your boot soles just now—don't trouble to excuse yourself. You see, I have already compared it with the tracks leading from this house to your horse yard and find that the man who borrowed the sergeant's horse this morning wore the same boots——"

"But all English boots are more or less alike, and they are doubtless worn by every mine manager, or whoever can afford them, all along the line."

"Now, strangely enough, my friends, the Customs' authorities at Cairns inform me that such is not the case. There have been no importations of English-made boots at that port for a longer time than any boot could last. The stores in Murgooona and all the townships around have none, and I have not been able to find any one but yourself who wears them."

"But the very fact that I wear them is proof that the Customs people do not know what comes into the country." Mr. Hornsby seemed to be getting angry.

"Oh, no ; you could have taken them in as personal property."

"But so could any one else."

"Perhaps, but extremely improbable. Most people up here prefer Colonial or American footwear. But let that go too in the meantime. With a strange sense of old-time romance which seems to be associated with Chillagoe Charlie, you left a cheque in payment for the stolen horse, and then, actuated by the same feeling, or feeling annoyed that the sergeant didn't appear to think the cheque of any value, you honoured it yourself. Now, no one who knew nothing of Charlie would do that, for how could he cash it?"

"I am really too tired to argue further. There have been facts in all you have said, yet they all miss the mark because I am not the man. I never to my knowledge saw the gentleman you think you have got in me, and, to cut it short, I can prove that at the time you say Charlie tied you up I was in camp, here. Now, I am about tired of all this business; you have shown yourself very observant, but if I told my men what you have said, there would be the usual trouble with the insurance companies on your behalf as soon as your friends missed you."

"I am sorry you threaten me. If I told my own men—they're the pick of Queensland, and were sent up through the night by special train—I venture to think Caledonia Camp would cease to exist as a mining community."

"Do you mean to say that your men do not know of the charges you have brought against me?"

"They certainly do not, and I have no intention of telling them at present."

"Then what are you going to do? Whatever warrant you may have to arrest Chillagoe Charlie, you can have none against Charles Hornsby, mine manager of the Caledonia Company——?"

"I am not going to do anything just yet, for two

reasons. The first one is that, though I am a policeman, I have a sort of liking for the person known as Chillagoe Charlie, whoever he is, and do not believe he is guilty of most of the charges brought against him ; I would therefore like him to escape if he could, but I must do my utmost to run him down, and I shall do so. The second reason is that as you took the warrant for his arrest from my room I am powerless—that paper I showed you was an income-tax form—I merely wanted to draw you to-night. I thank you for this dinner, and if you could see that my men get a decent feed, we would go back to Murgoona until new papers were made out—you took them all, you know. You understand me ? ”

“ I do ; you mean to suggest for my benefit that a fleet horse under me and the Never Never in front of me would be a good thing.”

“ It looks that way.”

“ Then, my dear sir, until the Caledonia Company dispenses with my services, which I have reason to believe they mean to do, I may say my address will be Caledonia Camp. You will find me here at any time. Now that we’ve finished the unpleasant business, try one of these cigars, and make yourself comfortable. I gave orders when we came in to prepare a meal for your men. In fact, they have finished dining now, I hear Dirty Sam’s banjo. The new boys the parson sent must be working the shift themselves.”

“ Then I’ll wish you good evening, and I hope that we won’t meet again.”

“ But I hope we shall ; you’re the finest sample of a policeman I ever met, and I should like to continue our acquaintance. And where are you going, anyway, at this time of night ? Stay here with me, the men will attend to your fellows.”

"Stay here? I'd rather not, thank you. We'll get back to Murgooona——"

"Oh, I see, you are afraid of me?"

"No, I'll be shot if I am; but I'm afraid of what my confounded eyes might see, or my senses of deduction make clear. Why, man, don't you see I am giving you every chance I can? but even now I see more evidence against you, and the lad's tell-tale face shows that he also knows what he would not tell for thousands."

"You are——" "Right" was the word that Tom meant to add, but he stopped in time and substituted "in error."

"Dear me, Sherlock, you are a most remarkable man. I believe you could easily by some of your deductive reasoning prove Tom Willoughby to be your man, even although he is but a boy."

"Tom Willoughby," exclaimed the officer. "Is that your name? I did not catch it to-night."

"Yes, you seem surprised to hear it," said Tom. "Do you know any one of that name?"

"No; but I knew a man named John Willoughby, and you're very like him. He and I were both engineers on the Tyne together, and were like brothers until I left for Australia. He became manager of the yard afterwards, and once wrote to me about his brother who was supposed to be somewhere out here."

"Your friend was my father," said Tom. "He died four years ago, and his brother, if alive, is the only relative I have in the world."

"You have a couple of friends at any rate, Tom," said Mr. Hornsby, "notwithstanding that *one* of them is supposed to be the notorious Chillagoe Charlie."

He turned his head away as he spoke, and Tom

knew that his words had a double meaning, one of which was intended for him alone. Yes, Tom knew he had two friends, and *one* was supposed to be Chillagoe Charlie.

"My boy," broke in the officer kindly, "if your uncle is on top of the ground in Australia I'll find him for you."

"Let us go down to the camp and see if the boys can provide any entertainment," suggested Mr. Hornsby, "I feel so relieved with the knowledge that I am not going to be brought captive home to Rome—or, rather, Brisbane—that I fancy I could almost sing a song myself." His voice was sarcastic.

"Don't sing too soon," spoke the superintendent, grimly, as they passed out.

"Ah, excuse me a moment while I give the cook some orders," suddenly cried Mr. Hornsby, catching Tom by the arm. "Walk down and I will follow immediately." Then turning to Tom he said, "You heard all that passed to-night, and know as much as I do. There is no time to talk just now, and it were better perhaps that we should keep our own thoughts to ourselves in any case. I want you to go and cash this cheque to-night. Saddle my horse yourself and ride back on the Murgoona track to the springs. The moon will be up before you get there, and if you are followed you can easily outdistance any horse but Mike O'Flannigan's, and the parson has got his just now. Stick this cheque up on the tree under the notice that is there, and then hide near and wait. Should any one come and take it down, tell them you want payment for it; if the right man does so he will at once respond; and if any man touches it who does not see the force of your request, compel him to put the cheque back under the muzzle of this revolver.

When you meet the right man act as you think fit, you know my feelings, and if no one comes wait there until morning and bring the cheque back. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly, sir, and you may depend on me acting as you would yourself. Go down among the men and the troopers now, and I will slip away without any one knowing."

"All right, Tom ; but remember, don't run any risks. If the man should prove nasty take to your horse and clear out. We might be mistaken as well as the policeman, you know."

Mr. Hornsby stretched out his hand as he spoke, and a little surprised at this token of friendship from such a cold, emotionless man as he had previously appeared to be, Tom took it, and found his own grasped in a grip that no one would suspect could be given by the slender mine manager. They then parted, Mr. Hornsby going down to the camp, where a concert was in full swing, and Tom to the horse yard, carrying Mr. Hornsby's saddle and bridle on his arm.

"Well, boys, I hope you have had a good meal," cried Mr. Hornsby, as he approached the camp fire.

"We had, sir," answered one of the troopers, "and we're having a jolly good concert now."

"Long Tom and his mates are working the mine themselves," volunteered Dirty Sam. "We will relieve them at midnight, and by to-morrow we can form the three shifts again."

"We don't mind giving a hand if required, sir," spoke a big trooper. "Most of us know something about mining."

"At least we've all lost money at the game," laughed another. "But, by hokey ! I would like to know

which of you fellows it was who gave me that kick to-night. I thought at first it was the horse that did it."

"It might have been a bunyip," suggested Mike O'Flannigan innocently. "I heard a fellow say the other day that there were some of them about in an old shaft over on that ironstone patch."

"No, there were two of them ; they came into camp like cyclones," returned the trooper, "and went off again so quick that I thought I saw blue light flashing around them. I shouldn't be surprised if, when you look at their tracks to-morrow, you'll find their horses' hoofs were cloven."

"Let's get on with the concert," cried another trooper. "Here you, Sam, give us that song you were about to start——"

"Hallelujah ! Hallelujah !" yelled Dave.

"Here, it's not you who is singing just now," spoke one of the men reprovingly. "And anyhow, we want something more lively than that."

"He isn't singing," grinned Dirty Sam, "he's swearing just now. What is it, Dave ? have ye been bitten again ?"

"No, but I know by the way that dog is listening that there's some more blamed fools coming here—I don't mean to say that you trooper fellows are fools, for you are all decent mates, but this camp has been fairly rushed of late by all sorts of people passing on to the rush at Crocodile's Crossing, an' our tucker can't hold out much longer if we have to feed half Queensland——"

"Shut up, Dave !" roared the miners as one man, "we grudge no man his tucker."

"I didn't mean that we did, but—Britannia rules the waves, we—oh, I forget what I meant."

"The dog is right in any case," remarked the trooper superintendent, as Nigger began barking. "I hear hoof-beats myself now. That is a fine little mongrel you've got, boys."

"Yes," agreed Peter the Poet; "it is Tom's dog; he and it can speak to each other."

"It seems there is a number of horsemen coming here in any case," Mr. Hornsby said. "They have seen the camp lights and are turning off the track now. They have come from the west too."

Whoever the riders were they were in a hurry, that much was easily evident, and the camp waited expectantly until they came up.

"What place is this?" some one shouted while the visitors were yet some distance away. "Are there any policemen anywhere nearer than Murgoona?"

"What in blazes do ye want with policemen?" roared back Dave. "Aint ye able to fight out your own trouble?"

"Yes," answered a rider, as half a dozen men rode up to the fire, "but we can't get our men to fight with. Crocodile Crossing rush is a swindle; there isn't enough copper in the whole place to make a man blind if he put it in his eye, and we've bought up nearly all the properties."

"More fool you," Dirty Sam laughed; "hitch up your horses and have a drink of tea."

"No, thanks, we can't wait," cried one of the others; "we want to get into Murgoona to share the reward offered; that will just about pay us for what we have lost."

"What reward?" asked the superintendent quickly.

The troopers had all discarded their tunics because of the heat, and were not recognised as being such by the strangers.

"Chillagoe Charlie's reward. He is there now," spoke all the newcomers at once.

"What?" yelled all.

"Here, you fellows," said the superintendent, "one of you tell the story and we'll understand. You say Chillagoe Charlie is at Crocodile Crossing just now?"

"He was when we left, at any rate," answered one of the men. "We had just found out by one or two rough assays that we had been done in our speculations in buying up the claims, and as all the professional miners around us had left their claims to go and man some mines near, we could see that the whole thing was a fraud. Well, just as we were wondering whether we would keep the boom up long enough to float the shows into limited companies in Melbourne and Sydney, a man in a mask came out of the darkness and rode up to our fire. He never said a word, but his hands were crammed full of revolvers and his belt bristled with them, and I don't know how many rifles were slung across his saddle. We knew who he was at once, of course, and every man who had a horse near made a rush for it, and here we are. Don't you fellows think you are in this, however; the reward is ours by right, and we're off now to Murgooona."

"You'll get the reward all right when the man you all ran from is caught," spoke the superintendent; his men were too well trained to betray themselves. "But how, by all the wonders in this country, didn't you catch him yourselves and make sure of the reward? He couldn't have much chance against such a mob of you."

"We are not policemen," spoke the leader of the reward claimers coldly; "we are doing our duty to the State by reporting the case. Men, give us a

drink of water and we'll get on to the township. We thought at first this was it."

"No, it's about a couple of hours' fast riding yet," Dirty Sam informed them; "but you can water your horses at the springs half way."

"Thanks for the information. North Queensland isn't a country for civilised people in my opinion. Let's away again, boys, and keep together for fear that masked beggar may come in among us." Hastily drinking the pannikins of water given them, the hot and excited men from the south of the tropic of Capricorn went off again.

"Come, lads, saddle up," then exclaimed the superintendent; "our work lies ahead."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Mr. Hornsby, taking the superintendent aside as the troopers went off for their horses.

"Go out after Charlie, of course."

"But I thought you were of opinion that you were beside him just now?"

"And I still think so, but I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, and——"

"But you have no warrant for his arrest?"

"No; but I find that Charles Hornsby is a J.P. in Queensland. Perhaps he will sign this paper for me and thus give me one."

"Well, that is good. Sign a warrant for my own arrest!"

"No; for the arrest of Chillagoe Charlie—if we catch him."

"Oh, all right. Give me your paper. But don't you think the whole thing is a farce? You must be convinced by this time that Chillagoe Charlie is impersonated by lots of people, and that he is getting credit for many deeds he knows nothing of. That is,

if there is such a person at all, which I am beginning to doubt very much."

"Then, Mr. Hornsby, it is lucky for—for somebody that I was sent up here, for if I can get on to the track of any one using that title who hasn't the copyright, don't you see that all the charges fall flat? One man can't be held responsible for the doings of other people. But you came in from Crocodile Crossing to-night on a very fast horse. These people who have just passed had nothing special in the way of horse-flesh—they were all borrowed mounts—and with perhaps an exception they did not appear to be men used to record-breaking rides, as you are. Now, it is just possible that our friend Charlie has done a very smart piece of work, and I should like to settle that point."

"You mean that he appeared at Crocodile Crossing purposely to be seen, and then by means of a phenomenal horse and a knowledge of bush short-cuts got here before the people who saw him, and in fact dined with the police superintendent before they arrived——?"

"You are a thought-reader, Mr. Hornsby—unless, of course, you knew——"

"I didn't; I came in here from the Crossing very fast, I'll admit, but it was to see the mines, and almost any man could have walked the distance since my arrival here. But what are you driving at? You are not telling me your thoughts for nothing."

"I was going to propose that I leave a couple of men here to—well—gather flowers if they like; but also to see that you do not undertake another desperate ride. Are you agreeable?"

"Quite. I know you would station your men somewhere near in any case to watch me, and they

may as well be comfortable. But I don't think Charlie will wait out there until you come. He seems to be a very active sort of person, and doubtless he is now making an effort to keep an engagement at some place not within ordinary riding distance from the Crossing."

"We'll see. Here are my boys all ready ; we've got some good horses and some good men among us, and Charlie will have to travel fast to keep in front of us."

"Yes, but watch that he doesn't get hold of your clothes and repeat the trick he played on that sergeant of yours. You know, I suppose, that already you have men chasing Charlie in all directions. He was dressed as a sergeant trooper the last I heard of him, and your sergeant in my clothes and on my horse was riding towards the Indian Ocean on the other side of Australia after him——"

"Not on your horse. He left yours tied up to the same tree his own was tied to, and sent his man to me to report. You can send a man for it any time. He tore up your cheque, of course."

"Then I think that sergeant sadly needs a lesson in manners. What right had he to tie my horse up anywhere ? No matter whether he found his own or not, his first duty should have been to return mine, as he promised to do." Mr. Hornsby was certainly angry.

"But, dear me, why all this display of temper over a horse when you showed none over serious matters ? The horse was taken away as a decoy, and you know where to send for it——"

"I know nothing whatever about it, sir, and I tell you plainly that I look upon your man as a common horse thief ; he got the animal from me on condition that he would return it. I allow none of my horses to be tied up, nor do I call that returning it. By Jupiter !

I will now give you some real work to do. In my capacity as a J.P. I have certain powers over the police, and I shall send you after that man; he is chasing Chillagoe Charlie, or thinks he is, and I shouldn't be surprised if that person circles round and hunts you——"

"A sort of circle arrangement, in which case, perhaps, I should just stay where I am and wait till Charlie comes up; by your own reasoning the sergeant will be at hand soon after, and so all will be pleased without any of the leaders moving from this camp." The officer's tone was significant.

"Leave or stay, just as you choose," snapped Mr. Hornsby. "Your troopers would be more at home hunting rabbits. I believe you'll have every man out prospecting just now arrested in time for being Chillagoe Charlie, because he wears boots, because he breathes air, eats, drinks, and sleeps, and reads a newspaper when he gets one. All of which is sure proof that he is the man you want, for does not he also do all those things——?"

"I just hope we can get the hobbles on one or two Chillagoe Charlies for the sake of the original one," put in the officer, "and I have just tumbled to the fact that you are keeping me here, wasting time, for a purpose, so I will wish you good-night. Come on, lads, Crocodile Crossing first stop."

"Right O!" the waiting troopers answered, vaulting into their saddles, and next moment they were cantering over the clearing between the camp and the main track. Mr. Hornsby listened until the hoof-beats could no longer be heard, then, turning to join the camp-fire circle, he found Mike O'Flannigan at his side. Mike's face was expressionless. It always was when he was thinking.

"I beg pardon, sir," he began, "but I heard you walking into the policeman about that bay horse of yours. It's in the yard now, feeding, and has been there since midday. I found it when out for the camp horses this morning, and brought it in with the others."

"Yes, Mike, I saw it in the yard myself ; but if that superintendent had known it, he would have deduced some more unpleasant facts. Oh, I forgot ; you don't know. I want to talk to you about your experiences of this morning, Mike, but I haven't time just now. Are you ready for another ride ? Bring Dirty Sam over here and I'll tell you both what I want done."

Mike walked carelessly up to the fire and touched his comrade on the shoulder, and, yawning sleepily, Sam arose and followed him into the shadows where Mr. Hornsby stood.

"Boys," spoke the manager, "I want something done that has nothing to do with mining."

"Well, we'll tackle anything, from cutting out that boss trooper from his mates to catching Chillagoe Charlie," said Dirty Sam with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Has it to be kept from the boys ?"

"Yes ; in the meantime I want you to pick out a couple of horses and ride after that mob of returning rushers that passed, going into Murgooona. Tom is carrying out an order which may get him into trouble with them. He will be at the springs, or on the way back, when they will meet. Now, do you understand ?"

"Perfectly ; we're to keep out of sight of the new chums, and chime in if the lad gets into trouble," said Sam. "Let's away, Mike, I smell some fun before morning ; but I say, sir, what about relieving those fellows who are working just now, at midnight ?"

"There is enough of us in camp to do that. I'll tell them I needed you for some special work, and now that the pump is working they can manage to keep things going, and that is all we can hope to do until we get more men. Lead your horses out, and go through the bush until out of hearing distance of the camp; there are some troopers hanging about watching us, and I don't want them to know on any account."

"We understand," said Sam; "no one will know we've ever left the camp unless you tell yourself."

The two men walked over to the horse yard, and Mr. Hornsby went up to the camp fire among the men, who were all listening intently to a weird and wonderful tale which Ginger Bob was narrating with great dramatic effect.

Meanwhile the troopers were rapidly galloping westwards, and Tom, followed by the swindle claim-purchasers, was making good time towards the east. Soon these slower-moving people were shadowed by Mike and Sam. But yet another man was also travelling east; he never came near the track, but, keeping in the bush, he flew along at terrific pace, crashing through light timber patches, leaping large obstacles, and bending under the heavier projecting tree-limbs. And the waning moon shone coldly in the cloudless sky, lighting the tracks of all alike.

CHAPTER VI

WHO IS CHILLAGOE CHARLIE ?

ABOUT midnight Tom saw the lime bluffs loom through the semi-darkness, and he knew he was near the springs. He had only been over the track once before, but now it was impossible to miss it, as the rush had gone over it since he passed, and the troopers. And his horse knew every little sandy creek and gully on the way, and Tom knew enough of Gulf country methods to allow the noble animal to pick its own course through soft patches and over the hard ironstone surfaces. Suddenly it turned off to the left and halted, and Tom saw that he was in the middle of the pandanus clump in which Nigger had located the pool of water. He slid from the saddle and led his steed to the water, and after it and he had drunk more than was good for them of the precious but evil smelling and strangely tasting fluid, he threw the bridle over a convenient projecting branch and turned to the tree on which the dilapidated notice was posted. Then he stopped abruptly, and his heart jumped violently. A masked man was standing behind the trunk watching him, and a little way off a steaming horse was hitched to a quinine-tree. For a moment he hesitated; he had not calculated upon being met so suddenly by the



**"A MASKED MAN WAS STANDING BEHIND THE TRUNK
WATCHING HIM."**

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gentleman of such evil reputation, and from whom most men would have run as if from a bunyip. But Tom was one to whom fear of bodily harm was unknown, and quickly recovering from the state of nervous excitement into which the sight of the notorious bushranger had thrown him, he marched boldly to the tree, and pretending not to see the man on the other side, hung up the cheque on one of the nails which fixed the larger notice. The man meanwhile had stepped out from behind the tree and was quietly looking on. Tom finished his work and turned round. "Good evening," he said, with an effort to speak as calmly as if it were an everyday occurrence with him to run up against such as his present companion.

The man made no answer, but continued to stare at Tom, his eyes shining through the mask like pieces of burning coal.

"This is intended for your notice, I believe," Tom went on; "I have come here to collect the amount and get back to camp as soon as possible."

"Which amount? The reward or the figure on that cheque?" The voice was gruff and quite evidently disguised.

"Payment of the cheque is all that concerns me; but I did not expect that you would put in an appearance quite so promptly."

"You are sure I am the man whose signature foots that paper?"

"No, I have doubts about that, but if you pay the money that will settle them."

"You don't appear to be afraid of me? Most people are——"

"Oh, I'm not, I have nothing you could take from me; my mission to you is friendly, and if you showed

any inclination to harm me in any way I would shoot you."

"What!" exclaimed the man, "you would shoot me? That is comforting knowledge, but as I hope you see I have no evil intention regarding you, you might tell me how you could do that. I am a pretty powerful man, and how could you shoot before I could take you by the throat?"

"Easily enough; the revolver is in my hand now, ready cocked, in my pocket."

"Ha, ha! That is an old trick; but why don't you use it now, and earn that thousand pounds?"

"I don't want a thousand pounds, and if I did I'd earn it some other way than that. But I saw you this morning, too; I was looking under my tent when you borrowed the sergeant's clothes. Is that his horse you have still? It must be a flier, for you were reported as being out past White Downs station."

"Yes, people give me credit for being at several places at the same time. No, that is not the trooper's horse, but it is a fast one all the same. I suppose I needn't ask how you came into possession of the cheque; you didn't steal it, I hope?"

"What is the good of all this masquerading, sir," cried Tom impatiently, ignoring the man's last words. "You must know that I know you, and am ready to help you in any way."

"No, I did not know that you knew me, and I don't think you do, young man. Who am I?"

"You are either Mr. Hornsby or Mike O'Flannigan, although how you got here ahead of me I don't know, seeing that you gave me your fastest horse."

"Ah, I note you use the singular now; you have decided between the two gentlemen you named. Tell me who."

"I am telling you ; you gave me your horse to-night to come here and warn our mutual friend that he was being closely tracked, and that several things had given him away. It certainly looked as if he were the man, but I see now that it was yourself all the time. Tell me what you wish me to do, sir."

"Why, my lad, I don't want you to do anything, unless I might ask you to believe that I have never done anything of which I need feel ashamed, despite what people say about me. But who is the person you call our mutual friend ? Is it possible that I know him ? I assure you that I am neither Mr. Hornsby, the mine manager and J.P., although I am indebted to that gentleman for more than he knows, nor am I Mike O'Flannigan, one of the pioneers and prospectors of the Palmer Ranges. So you see you don't know who I am."

"And I am glad. I thought you were the parson at first, and so Mr. Hornsby led me to believe he thought. But since seeing you I am quite convinced we were both mistaken ; he is a much stouter man than you, and I parted from him to-night at Crocodile Crossing. I then thought from what I know that you might be Mike, and that you and Mr. Hornsby doubled each other, for the policeman was very sure of himself to-night. And you should change your style of boots, never have anything to do with a newspaper, and don't on any account borrow ropes or cords for binding purposes from any camp. That officer you tricked in Murgooona—he told us the whole story—is as sharp as nails, and he will track you if you make the slightest slip. Mr. Hornsby told me to act as I thought best, but I am sure he would approve of my telling you what I have told, even although you are not the parson."

"Do you mean, boy, that you would be the friend of Chillagoe Charlie?"

"I do, and so would the parson and Mr. Hornsby. But say, how about Mike? He and you must know each other well, for you changed horses this morning."

"Boy, you shouldn't ask me to say anything which might get a very decent fellow into trouble, if you were put upon your oath in a court of law. You said you were friendly disposed towards me; for that I am grateful, for you are the only friend Chillagoe Charlie has in these parts, and you are the first to talk to him as one man should to another. Now I will put myself in your hands by telling you something. Chillagoe Charlie meant to put in some time down around Murgoona, but the arrival of the superintendent and special duty men from Brisbane makes that impossible, so he will disappear. He will go north and assume another name; but, my boy, he is very wealthy, and if you wish funds for any purpose a line dropped to Charles Christmas at Laura Post Office will get you any amount you like to ask. Now, I have another thing to say before we part, and that is, don't try to find out who Chillagoe Charlie is. You might succeed, and then you would be sorry. Will you shake hands?"

They gripped each other's hands and moved to their respective horses.

"One thing more, my boy," cried the bushranger. "I know who you are, although you haven't placed me, and I might just mention that your uncle was working a wonderfully rich gold claim up on one of the Palmer headwaters about a fortnight ago. Oh, by the way, here's the money for that cheque, I nearly forgot. Tell Mr. Hornsby——"

"Here is a crowd of horsemen," interrupted Tom, "and they see us. Run, or they'll catch you."

"Oh, it's those people—they're harmless enough. Come, I'll take you through them. They seem to be half mad, judging from their apparent excitement."

"They recognise you, that is what has excited them," cried Tom. "Get away at once."

"No, we'll chase them away. Follow me." Chillagoe Charlie rode out from the timber, followed by Tom, and yells of terror arose from the advancing horse-men.

"It's his ghost," one of them cried. "Ride faster."

"He must be the devil," cried another. "We left him at Crocodile Crossing."

"He's coming for us, anyway," wailed a third rider. "Scatter, boys, scatter, or we'll all be murdered!"

Instantly the group broke into the bush on either hand, and Chillagoe Charlie and Tom galloped down the track past them. The yells of the surprised reward-claimers might have been heard miles away, and they were, and, wondering what had happened to frighten the valiant Crocodile Crossing claim owners, Dirty Sam and Mike came up to see. They kept in the bush, however, for they did not wish to be seen, and while they were speculating as to whether Chillagoe Charlie had met the people in front or if they were fighting among themselves, two riders tore past, going west.

Just then the new chum rushers had unanimously arrived at the idea of catching their man themselves. They reasoned that he was only one man, or, with his companion, two, while they numbered sixteen. This latter fact was very comforting to them, and they turned and rode after the couple who had split them up so easily, shouting and yelling as if they were Chinamen trying to frighten their opponents in battle.

About this time Tom suddenly realised that he was alone. He had not noticed what his companion had done ; but, suspecting that he had turned into the bush to avoid being seen with any one whom his presence might incriminate, Tom drew rein and rode easier, thinking he might be joined later on by the gentleman with the mask, whom he had somehow grown to like.

But he was not ; instead a howling mob of madmen appeared at his heels, and he turned to look at them, knowing that his own horse could outdistance anything that his pursuers possessed.

"There's only one, boys—after him !" shouted one of the following horsemen ; and the men from down south came on as fast as their tired and thirsty steeds could take them.

"Bet a fiver you're a liar," shouted Dirty Sam, riding on to the track in front of them. "There's enough of us to give you beggars all you want."

Mike now appeared by his side, and, recognising them, Tom rode back. But the new chums weren't having any, as Sam said, and resumed their eastward course without delay. What they thought of their chances of obtaining the reward now was known only to themselves.

"Hallo, kid !" Sam cried as Tom rode up ; "you're a long way from home."

"And this is a funny time to take exercise," added Mike.

"Just what I thought when I recognised you boys," laughed Tom, who at once guessed that they had been sent to look after him if occasion required. "I was in at the bank getting a cheque cashed."

"That won't do," said Sam. "Banks are not open during the night, unless Chillagoe Charlie or some of his kind opens them."

"Well, he opened one for me—at least he took the cheque and gave me gold for it. See, I have it here. I suppose those fellows would have tried to rob me if you two hadn't appeared."

"I don't know," spoke Sam thoughtfully. "I fancy it wasn't any money you had they were after. You had a mate when we saw you first. Where has he gone?"

"I don't know, but he is a real decent fellow and might have been one of yourselves but for his mask."

"You mean Chillagoe Charlie was your mate?" Mike said quietly. "I would like to know where he is heading."

"He's heading north, boys, to the old place," a voice called out on their right, and a rider flashed past them. "Bring the lad with you when you come."

"Hold hard, Chillagoe," roared Sam; "come and introduce yourself." But he got no answer, and only the ringing of hoof beats on the ironstone patch ahead gave any indication that the vision which had flitted past was real and mounted on a superb horse.

"Well, boys," said Mike after a period of silence, "we can take it easier now; there is no use pushing our horses, seeing we have all managed what we came out for."

"Not a bit," agreed Sam, drawing rein; "we'll let the animals cool down a bit."

Tom likewise slackened pace, and laughing and talking cheerfully on all subjects, the trio rode slowly along. It was now almost cool, and there was a slight breeze in motion that made the early morning air very pleasant.

Thus it was nearly four o'clock in the morning when they clattered into camp. To their surprise they found

two men sitting by the camp fire, which was burning brightly, and a moment later they recognised in those two Mr. Hornsby and the parson.

"Ah, boys," said Mr. Hornsby, "I am glad to see you back all right." He looked meaningly at Tom as he spoke, and came forward to assist him in unsaddling his steed.

"I saw him, sir," whispered Tom ; "he's not a bad fellow. Here is the money, but we've been mistaken even more than the superintendent was."

"That is fairly evident," answered Mr. Hornsby, glancing at the fire where the parson sat lost in thought ; "he rode in here an hour ago. I was waiting for your return by the fire there ; when he came up he said he got so lonely out at the Crossing by himself after every one left that he thought he would ride along this length. So the troopers will find the place deserted."

"It is all very strange, and I can only think that there are more than one Chillagoe Charlie. Sam told me he was seen at the Crossing by a lot of people as late as ten o'clock, and then I found him waiting for me at the springs again a full hour before those who were running away from him got there."

"The whole matter is beyond me," said Mr. Hornsby wearily, "and I am going to give it a rest. I shall actually come to believe that I am the man myself and that I ride all over the country in my sleep, if I hear much more about the gentleman of Chillagoe."

"How about the mine, sir ?" asked Sam. "Shall we go and give a hand now or relieve at next shift ?"

"Go and get a sleep if you can. Soon after daylight there will be enough men here from Murgoona to man ten mines. The parson says so, anyhow, and he is always right."

"But how can he know?" persisted Sam. "No one has been in at the township, and even if you had sent in, men wouldn't come out to take the place of strikers."

"Ask him for particulars yourself, Sam; I am too sleepy."

Sam placed the bell on his horse's neck and then allowed it to go free. "I'll ask him now," he said, walking up to the parson. But the parson had fallen asleep.

Just then Nigger came running out of a tent, and barked his gladness at seeing his master again.

"Yes, take him to bed, Nigger," said Mr. Hornsby, yawning, "and constitute yourself camp guard until sunrise. That is a wonderful dog of yours, Tom; he nosed out a couple of troopers half an hour ago——"

"Troopers!" cried the parson, starting up; "where?"

"Oh, round about the camp. They're watching it, you know. But come along and turn in; you know where you stay."

"I do feel very tired," said the parson, rising and stretching himself; "I must have been running about too much."

Mr. Hornsby and he walked off towards the manager's house, and shortly after Dirty Sam, Mike, and Tom were in their bunks. The men from the Crossing who had worked the mines until midnight were sleeping in some spare tents further down the creek.

And the stars faded in the sky, a flush of red spread over the eastern horizon, the sun shot up behind the distant lime bluffs, and the camp was awake again. Sure enough at breakfast-time men began to arrive at the camp from Murgoona and other parts, and immediately were given employment by the mine manager.

"I don't know how you managed this, parson," he said to that gentleman, "but you must have developed most wonderful powers of mind concentration if you brought those men here since yesterday. I know you were at Crocodile Crossing all day, and you came here last night, so it must have been by will-power that you charmed them."

The parson laughed. "There is no mystery about how they came here," he said. "I knew one of the disappointed rushers, and before they left for Murgoon I gave him a letter to deliver for me. That letter brought you your men."

"But God save the King, boss, you've taken on far more men than ye can get into the shaft in three shifts, an' ye've got two shifts already, countin' us and the Crossing boys."

"They are going back to Crocodile Crossing, Dave, and I want you boys for special work."

"Are ye sacking us, boss?" asked one of the volunteers from the Crossing; "we don't want to go back to an ironstone reef. The parson knows of something better, when ye are done with us."

"I know of nothing better than that same reef, boys," spoke the parson, who had been talking earnestly with the tall, black-whiskered prospector; "the rush is not a duffer after all, although its promoters are not aware of that fact. I wanted to tell you at the time of my little episode with O'Brian, but I changed my mind just then. Boys, you can go and peg in the entire reef now. It seems Chillagoe Charlie frightened all the others away."

"But there is no copper except what the O'Brian push carted there," spoke a miner in surprise.

"No, there isn't any copper," answered Long Tom, as the tall prospector was called, "but there is some-

thing else. Boys, the rush is all right, only we rushed the wrong thing. The lad who was assaying got gold in his last try, and the parson tells me there's two and a half ounces of it to the ton. Gather in our horses, some of you, and the rest will pack up some stores which the manager here has promised to give us."

For a full minute the men were silent, but as the significance of Long Tom's words dawned upon them, they broke into a wild cheer. "Good old parson!" they shouted; then some one added, "Don't forget Chillagoe Charlie, boys; he's given us all the ground."

"Good old Charlie!" roared the men.

"And a cheer for the young assayer and Mr. Hornsby," cried Long Tom, and again the miners shouted out their approval.

"Here, boys, where do we come in?" asked Hungry Ted dismally; "I reckon we ought to have been in this affair."

"There is a Happy Land, Ted," roared Dave; "can't ye see that there's more comin'? We're not going on duty to-day 'cos we're wanted for special work."

"Yes," said the parson; "you boys are wanted for special work by Mr. Hornsby, but you must all volunteer."

"Well, we all do that now," said Dirty Sam; "what is it?"

"Wait till the Crocodile Crossing men clear out, Sam, advised Peter the Poet; "you can't expect to be told in presence of half Queensland."

"See here, parson," broke in Long Tom, "if that special work you talk of that Mr. Hornsby wants requires men who don't give a hang for anything, count us boys in too. Crocodile Crossing gold may be a good thing, but I don't think there is a man here who cares as much for gold or copper, for that part, so

much as he would care for a hand in a game with Mr. Hornsby or the parson ; speak for yourselves, boys."

"You're right, Long Tom," cried the men. "We don't live for what shekels we can make."

"It therefore becomes my duty to say," continued Long Tom, "that if there is anything on hand that needs men who don't care a flicker of an eyelid what danger there is, or what they have got to do, you can make your pick of us for the job as well as from your own men."

"Thanks, Mr.——" began Mr. Hornsby.

"Long Tom is my handle, sir."

"Then I thank you, Mr. Long Tom, for your offer, and it is just possible that I may call on you to make it good. At the present moment, however, it is best for you boys that you secure the ground at Crocodile Crossing ; when you prove it a little bit I will advance the funds for machinery, if you will allow me, and after the place is developed, perhaps I will call upon you all to oblige me. Meanwhile, it is the parson who is evolving some scheme, not I. I am the manager of the Caledonia Company's mines, and as such cannot tackle anything not in their interests. I may add, though, that if you develop the Crocodile Crossing shows sufficiently, my company will most likely make an offer to purchase them from you."

Then the sooner we get out to the Crossing the better for us," cried a miner. "Come on, boys ; we'll peg all the ground, pool all the gold, and divide equally."

"Right, Scottie," cried the men ; "let's clear. Here are our horses coming in."

"Very well sir," said Long Tom, addressing Mr. Hornsby. "When you want men for anything send for us ; the parson knows us already, and I don't need to tell him that Crocodile Crossing Camp, that is

to be, will stand by him against Governments or anything."

"Tut tut, Tom," the parson laughed; "you are too extravagant in your statements. Why should I require any one to stand by me against the admirable Queensland Government?"

"I don't know, sir; but call on us if occasion arises," answered Long Tom, leaping on his horse. "We'll stick by Crocodile Crossing now until it fizzles out or we hear from you or Mr. Hornsby."

With a greeting to the men remaining behind, the future Crossing claim holders rode off and soon were lost to sight; then the parson turned to Mr. Hornsby and said, "Perhaps we'd better tell the boys now."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Hornsby. "Listen, boys; you know both the parson and myself, you have been more than one successful trip with us. It was the parson who taught me anything I know, and but for him I could never have taken over the managership of the Caledonia Company's mines. But everything is now going all right here, thanks to you fellows who stood by me in every little trouble, and the time has come when the mines can do without us—at least without me—for I have received a cablegram from Britain this morning informing me that a new man is on the road to take my place. I do not know why I am displaced; I suppose it is because of some paltry shareholders whom I have unintentionally run against; but it doesn't matter; I have appointed all you fellows shift bosses, and when the new man comes you'll be able to keep him from bungling the mines. The parson and I are then going out prospecting on our own account, for we know of some likely country on the Palmer watershed——"

"And does ye mean to leave us here?" demanded

Dave reproachfully. "Does ye think for one Glory, glory hallelujah shake o' a cat's tail that we'd stick here without ye? If ye does ye is wrong, for we won't."

"But the mines, Dave, they will require your services. Other people can't take your place in them——"

"Hang the mines!" broke out Peter the Poet, in very unpoetical language. "What do we care for the Caledonia Company's mines? It's their manager we work for, not for the white-faced money-grabbers in the Old Country who own them."

"I tell you straight, boss," said Ginger Bob decidedly, "when you leave this camp we all leave; an' if ye think the parson an' you are to get away prospectin' up among the Chinkies without us—the boys that have been all over the country with one or the other of ye—ye is mighty far off the track. We're goin' with you wherever ye go, even if it is to find that funny old pole stuck away down further south than anybody has ridden. Ye can't shake us off, an' ye needn't try."

Bullocky Bill, Hungry Ted, and Tommy the Kangaroo intimated in terse language that Ginger Bob's words expressed their sentiments on the subject, but the others didn't speak. They were quite determined on the matter nevertheless.

"Boys, I never intended to go without you," spoke Mr. Hornsby; "but I had, as manager of these mines, to do what I could to ensure their continued successful development, hence my putting on so many men to-day. By the time the new manager arrives these men, under your directions, can have obtained a thorough knowledge of the mines' peculiarities, and then we'll clear out for the north. In justice to the Caledonia Company I couldn't ask you to leave their properties to the tender mercies of strangers, but as



you have decided for yourselves to risk your fortune with the parson's and mine, I am certainly not going to refuse you the chance. Boys, we'll make a try to find that hidden Chinese camp we've heard such a lot about——"

"An' come back with gold josses an' pigtails an'——"

"Shut up, Ginger; we won't worry about their josses if we can find out where they get their gold," spoke Dirty Sam. "We'll likely run up against Chillagoe Charlie up that way too. I believe it is up among the Chinese he hides when he is off duty."

"Ah, well, Sam; we'll see what old Mother Earth will yield of her treasures anyway," remarked the parson, hopefully; "and with Tom as our assayer-in-chief there is no telling what we may find."

"Am I included in the party, sir?" asked Tom, a thrill of pleasure running through him. He wanted to go north more than anything else, but had feared that he was to be left behind at the mines; and although he now held a good position there, he knew he would only remain until he had saved money sufficient to enable him to purchase a horse and go and look for his uncle in the north.

"Of course you are included," the parson answered; "you are one of us now. And Nigger is coming too. He will be very useful—but I had almost forgotten. Mr. Hornsby, will you allow one of the boys to ride to the Crossing for my buggy? He can lead the horse Tom rode in on last night, and the other one is hobbled somewhere there?"

"I'll go," said Dirty Sam, before any one could speak. "I want to see Long Tom about a little matter anyway."

"Bonnie Mary of Argyle, Sam, you're in a mighty hurry," growled Dave. "The boss hasn't said you

could go, an' maybe more than you would like to see the new goldfields at the Crossing."

But Dirty Sam seemed to have suddenly become very anxious to see Long Tom, and receiving a nod of assent from Mr. Hornsby, he had rushed to the yard for a fast riding horse and the one Tom had ridden from the Crossing. The parson went up and helped Sam to get ready, talking to him meanwhile in a low voice, then Sam leaped astride his steed and catching the bridle of the buggy horse galloped out into the bush. "Goodbye, boys," he shouted as he passed his comrades; "see you up north."

"What in thunder does Sam mean, mates?" cried Peter the Poet; "he said goodbye, and he'd see us up north? And he's riding as if he meant to cross Australia in record time."

"Jumpin' beans! I see a mob of troopers comin' along the track from the Crossin'," exclaimed Ginger Bob. "I wonder if they have anything to do with Sam's hurry? Maybe he saw them comin' near the rise. It's the same lot as were here last night——"

"How can they have anything to do with Sam, Ginger?" Peter the Poet laughed. "It's Chilligoe Charlie they're after, and they haven't got him yet, I can see. I'll bet he left a card to tell them he was sorry he couldn't stay at Crocodile Crossing until they came, as he was due somewhere else."

The men waited expectantly until the troopers drew near.

"A life on the ocean wave, boys," growled Dave. "This place is getting mighty crushed with troopers. I reckon they must just grow up here like mosquitoes; they're both pests anyhow——"

"Did you get your man, Superintendent?" Mr. Hornsby called out, a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"No; but we'll soon have him now," the officer replied sternly, as his men formed a cordon round the miners. "Just stand where you are, men," he said addressing them; "I have given orders to shoot the man who moves."

"You be fried in some of your own fat, you frizzle-faced old fool!" retorted Mike O'Flannigan. "Australia is still a free country, and I've yet to meet the man who can prevent me moving about as I please." He walked towards his tent defiantly, but a couple of troopers rode in front of him and barred his passage.

"Sorry, old man," one of them said, with a good-natured laugh; "we've got to pick out Chillagoe Charlie from among you before we allow you to scatter."

"Come off and I'll fight the pair of you," was Mike's somewhat irrelevant answer.

"My love has got a red, red nose," bawled out Dave. "Are we to stand this insult, boys? Let's go for the policemen—There is a happy land! We're free Australians an' have paid our poll-tax, an' I reckon I can just about swipe that trooper with the hooked nose—Oh, Jeremiah! The Scottish blue bells! God save the King! For he's a jolly good fellow! I—I—— Tell us some hymns, mates, quick, or I'll burst." The cause of Dave's sudden eloquence was the trooper he had singled out. That person had reached down and caught Dave by the belt; he was now holding him in a horizontal position alongside his horse, and paying absolutely no attention to Dave's struggles. Dave had made a mistake that time; for Moses Macleod was the strongest man in all North Queensland, and he was well accustomed to Dave's type.

Mike, however, had hauled one of his men off his horse and was about to repeat the performance with

the other, when the parson and Mr. Hornsby simultaneously called upon him to desist. All the others, troopers and men alike, were laughing at Dave's wild endeavours to free himself, and had not noticed Mike's work, or there might have been serious trouble. Mike walked back to his comrades, and in passing pulled Dave from the trooper's grip and set him on his feet, and while Dave poured out in a tempestuous torrent of words what he thought were the first lines of hymns, he folded his arms and assumed the listless expression common to him.

"Sir," began Mr. Hornsby, addressing the superintendent, "this is going a little bit too far. You had better explain, and quickly too, or I'll take steps to make the authorities in Brisbane agree that North Queensland is a bit too hot for your health."

"You may take any steps you choose, sir," replied the officer in dignified tones; "but I am in this country to do my duty—whatever other people are here for—and I request you, as a Justice of the Peace who has a personal knowledge of the man, to point out he who bears the name Mike O'Flannigan."

Dave stopped his singing and looked round at Mike, and his other comrades also gazed at him in silent wonder. Mike was, as a rule, the quietest man in camp, and what could he have done?

"That is the name I use at present," spoke Mike, before Mr. Hornsby had found words to answer.

"Oh, I thought it would be you—I arrest you as being the person known as Chillagoe Charlie," cried the officer, "and I warn you that anything you say——"

"Oh, shut up, you concentrated essence of idiocy!" roared Mike, and all his comrades rolled on the ground in paroxysms of laughter.

"Oh, Hallelujah, boys, I haven't a hymn left," moaned Dave, as he kicked up the sand. "I'll peg out, I know, if none o' ye can give me some."

"Oh, centipedes! an' snakes! an' iguanas! an' troopers! an' Chillagoe Charlies!" gasped Ginger Bob, in an attempt to restrain himself from swallowing more of the surface of Queensland than would be good for his digestive organs. "Aren't the troopers clever? Oh, my sore sides, boys! To think that Mike has been Chillagoe Charlie all the time, an' we never know'd it. Oh, my jaws has got a kink and I can't get it out——"

"Mike, you fat-headed drill jumper, can't ye make a speech?" Peter the Poet called out in dolorous tones. Peter always spoke mournfully when his sense of humour was tickled.

"I can't, boys," Mike responded feebly; "my sins, and the troopers, have found me out. Divide my clothes among you. The parson gets my horse, the boss the stockwhip I won from Bullocky Bill, and, I entreat you, boys, let the boss trooper have the biscuit I was keeping for Nigger."

The troopers, still in their saddles, had looked on with stolid faces while the miners had been rolling in the sand. They were tired of riding night and day after a person who seemed to be able to vanish and appear like a figure on a magic-lantern screen, and if their superintendent, who undoubtedly possessed a wonderful sense of tracking, was right in saying Mike O'Flannigan was the man they sought, then they would be able to have a good long spell at some shady water-hole while their horses recuperated. Their pay, of course, would run on all the time.

"When you have finished your contortions perhaps you will stand up," said the officer suddenly, address-

ing Mike; "I would like to see the man who has earned such a reputation as Chillagoe Charlie."

"Speak to him, boss," cried Mike, "I can't."

"I perceive you are a humorist of the first degree," said the parson to the officer; "that man has worked a shift in these mines for the past six months."

"Quite possible, sir; but he'll have to explain one or two things before that fact will save him."

"This arresting of people seems to be a habit with you," said Mr. Hornsby. "Last night, you remember, you also found one Chillagoe Charlie. Have you found more string, or another piece of a newspaper? Or perhaps you have found a button belonging to Chillagoe's coat and have noticed that Mike has nails where buttons should be?"

"I have proof which justifies me in taking that man——"

"Well, I assure you, you won't. I happen to know that you have no warrant for doing any such thing."

"I have the papers you signed last night——"

"My dear fellow, I see the Gulf country sun is too severe for you. I signed a paper empowering you to deal with Chillagoe Charlie, and this man is not he, as can easily be proved."

"But I have collected some proof that he is, or, at least, that he is associated with him——"

"Mike, your credit is goin' away from ye," spluttered Hungry Ted. "He says now that he has only got proof of who ye are; he isn't sure yet."

"You are coming down a bit, officer," Mr. Hornsby remarked with a smile, "and I propose, as the sun is now approaching the meridian, that you had better tell your men to give their horses a spell. While waiting on lunch you can tell the parson and me your story. We'll be sympathetic listeners."

The officer hesitated, looked at his tired men, then saw the state of the horses, and lastly discovered that he was hungry. That settled it; he knew from experience that the people of Caledonia Camp dined well, and signing to his men to dismount for the time, he followed the parson and Mr. Hornsby into the shade of the men's dining erection, keeping his eye on Mike's movements nevertheless.

"Come now, Mr. Superintendent," said Mr. Hornsby, proffering his cigar-case, "let us have your latest discoveries. You tracked me down because of my boots—by the way I see the parson wears boots almost identical with mine. How did you weave your mesh around Mike?"

"Simply enough; the two men who had been sent out White Downs way by the sham sergeant returned to Crocodile Crossing at daylight this morning. They, in answer to my question, told me that the horse the supposed sergeant rode was one which had won the double down at Cairns last week, and that it belonged to one named Mike O'Flannigan. They assumed that the sergeant, being a man very fond of anything special in the way of horseflesh—his own horse, it seems, carried everything before it at Townsville races—had bought it. Very well; of course, we know now that the man whom they took for their superior officer was Chillagoe Charlie, and I wanted to find out how he came to be riding Mike O'Flannigan's horse. And that information was at hand. I had barely finished with the men—of course, Chillagoe Charlie had played his vanishing trick again; he wasn't at Crocodile Crossing, nor could we find any tracks that might be his—when a despatch rider came through from Murgoona. He had ridden in the night with a message from the local constable to me, and from which it transpired that in

some mysterious manner—an extremely fast horse and knowledge of bush tracks might account for it—Chillagoe Charlie had appeared at the springs near Murgooona and held up the same people he had chased away from the Crossing. He had a companion with him, it seems, and when the crowd realised that he had no gang behind him, they turned to chase them and were confronted by two men, one of them on a horse that all had seen at the Crossing just at sundown, and ridden by a man all had seen ride up then, and whom one or two recognised as Mike O'Flannigan. Some of them also recognised the horse that had won the double at Cairns, hence it follows that Mike O'Flannigan was riding his own horse, and as the sergeant who had been impersonated sent me word that Mike had left this camp during the night and had not returned up to the time of his departure, the rest was fairly clear."

"Not to me," said the parson. "Give us your deductions."

"This is better than any story, boys," said Peter the Poet. All the men and some of the troopers had gathered round unnoticed while the superintendent had been explaining.

"From all these facts," went on the officer, "I deduce the following: First, that Mike O'Flannigan or his companion took away the sergeant's horse and stole his clothes—they have not been returned; the companion then made tracks specially for the benefit of followers and finally left the sergeant's horse tied up somewhere away to the south, and Mike rode on to the Crossing on his own horse and impersonated the sergeant. Secondly, he had the borrowed clothes and rested himself and horse all day, appearing as himself at sundown, which was

where he was foolish ; and just at that time when the country takes on its most ghostly aspect, and the owls come out, and the dingoes begin to howl—a time when people not used to back-block life would be inclined to be nervous—he comes on the scene as Chillagoe Charlie, with the result we all know. Thirdly, that after getting these off the ground, he made use of his famous horse, now well rested, and riding by tracks known only to himself and his friends, got into the springs before them. Fourthly, that, finding himself and his comrade hotly pursued, he took off his mask and appeared as the greatly surprised miner, Mike O'Flannigan, doubtless out riding for exercise. That is all ; the men I left here last night report that two or more riders came in here before daylight ; and what more evidence would any sane man want that I have at last run to earth the notorious Chillagoe Charlie ? ”

“Your deductions are very good,” laughed Mr. Hornsby. “But they have one fault, and that is, they are all wrong. I know nothing of the impersonation performance nor what led to it ; but I know that Mike, when he appeared at the Crossing at sundown, came out for me, and I rode his horse back to camp. He followed later and was here, as your men should be able to tell you, when you were here last night. As for Mike and a comrade appearing to a band of frightened new chums, you surely can't make anything out of that. I had occasion to send him out last night ; but what on earth could he hope to gain by posing himself off as Charlie, and then showing himself ? As for being hotly pursued, how could a mob of men, who could scarcely even ride, chase a man like Mike on a comparatively fresh horse of known speed, when theirs had been driven frantic-

ally all the way from the Crossing? No, my friend; you'll have to fix on some other man now and look for proof against him."

The officer was worried. All his elaborate planning had come to nothing, and his men and horses were played out. Acting on Mr. Hornsby's advice, he took a sleep in one of the tents, and his men did likewise wherever they could find a shady spot.

But Tom was thinking now, and his thoughts were shaping themselves to the belief that Dirty Sam might not be able to clear himself if his name were substituted for Mike's. He remembered how both had appeared to him after Charlie had left him, but he also distinctly remembered that he had heard Chillagoe Charlie's voice wishing them good-night, and also heard him riding away. "Ah, well," he muttered to himself, "the troopers have got their work cut out for them. They'll have all the country arrested on suspicion if they go on as they are doing. I wonder why Sam went off this morning in such a hurry?"

Evidently the superintendent was thinking, or had been dreaming something the same as Tom's thoughts were, for the first thing he did when he awoke and came out among the men was to ask who was out riding with Mike last night.

"Didn't know any one was out," Peter the Poet answered, and before the officer could apply to Mike himself, a trooper who had been left at Crocodile Crossing galloped into camp.

"He's there again," he shouted, as Mr. Hornsby, the parson, and all the others appeared. "We've got proof this time."

"Never mind the proof. Have you got the man?" demanded the chief of the troopers.

"No, sir. He was gone before we knew he was the party, but my mate is hot on his trail."

"Then how do you know he was the man?" asked the parson, while all the camp laughed.

"He came up with horses, and harnessed up a buggy lying there. He then boiled a billy, as we thought, and cleared out, and it was two hours later that, on passing his old fire, we saw this." The trooper held up to view a remnant of a trooper sergeant's uniform which had not been entirely burnt.

"Thunder!" gasped Mike. "Dirty——" he paused.

"Clothes are best burned," continued the parson cheerfully.

"Saddle up, men," cried the chief. "We can easily track him with a buggy."

All was now commotion, and in a few minutes the troopers were off again back the way they had come.

"Poor troopers!" chuckled Ginger Bob. "They think they'll catch Dirty Sam."

"He was foolish to take the parson's buggy," said Peter the Poet. "They can easily track it here."

"But he won't come here," laughed Mike. "And he has got my horse."

CHAPTER VII

OUT INTO THE UNKNOWN

THE troopers did not get much sympathy in Caledonia Camp, and the superintendent came in for a good share of ridicule, Dave giving it as his opinion that it was a "shame that good horses should have to go where a fool like the superintendent wanted them."

"You're right there," Peter the Poet put in. "If that new-fashioned Sherlock Holmes fellow would only let his horse take him where it wanted to go, he might find Charlie, but he'll never set eyes on him while he holds the reins."

"Could you run Charlie down, Ginger?" Mr. Hornsby asked quietly. "You can't expect a trooper officer to know too much of catching people——"

"I reckon I could be havin' a billy of tea with Dirty Sam inside an hour, boss," Ginger Bob hastened to answer. "But I'll go nap the troopers won't see him this side of next Christmas."

"Then you think that Dirty Sam is the man?" remarked the parson.

"Well, aint he been found burnin' the sergeant's clothes?" demanded Ginger. "How did he get them if he wasn't the fellow who took them from the sergeant?"

"He might have found them," suggested Hungry Ted.

"He might not be the man who burnt them at all," said Tommy the Kangaroo.

"He might have taken them from the parson's buggy," was Bullocky Bill's comment.

"It might not have been the sergeant trooper's clothes at all," spoke Tom. "All the man found was a half-burnt piece of khaki which might have come from anywhere."

"And you have struck the bull's eye first shot, Tom," laughed Mr. Hornsby. "I am inclined to believe that it was a piece of what were once my garments that was picked up, but as it is rather amusing to see how many men the superintendent will get his eagle eye fixed upon, I didn't say anything. He'll have you all arrested before he's done, boys."

"I believe he is the man himself," muttered Mike. "He might as well have said it was Tom there, as me. Come here, Tom, I am going to arrest you for being Chillagoe Charlie."

"If this goes on much longer," laughed Tom, "I may come to believe I am, myself."

"Good luck to him anyway, boys, whoever he is," cried Peter the Poet. "I will write a poem in his honour the first time I feel silly."

"Ah, well, boys," said the parson, "I am going out to get my buggy. I expect Dirty Sam will have driven it somewhere near here and hitched up the horses—that is, if he is not coming right into camp with it; for, boys, you may take it from me Sam is no more Chillagoe than any of you are."

"I'll go and hunt round for buggy tracks," volunteered Mike.

"No, you won't," grinned Dave. "Ye would join Sam, an' then all our Chillagoe Charlies would be lost."

"No, boys, I'll go myself if any of you will lend me a horse. I want some exercise in any case, and I'll ride along through the bush to cut off Sam on the other side of the big sand patch. I may camp out somewhere to-night, too, for I have a lot of thinking to do in connection with our prospecting trip up north."

"Oh, nonsense, parson," said Mr. Hornsby; "the mosquitoes will eat you up if you sleep outside to-night. Come back to camp whether you can cut Sam's tracks or not. I expect myself that he'll drive in shortly. He has not yet had more than bare time."

"I'll see how I feel; you know I have been neglecting my duties of late, and I thought I might ride out and say a word in season to the boys at the Crossing. You can store my buggy here until I come back, and of course you all know that when you are ready for the trip, I will be also."

"Ye needn't try to make the parson change his mind, boss," cried Dave; "he can't do it 'cos he hasn't got any mind but the one he's using, just like me an' my pants."

"If you feel you want to go, of course you can have your pick of the fresh horses in the yard," said Mr. Hornsby; "but all the same I think you should come back here to-night."

"Oh, very likely I shall," the parson answered; "but I have the feeling just now that I must be in motion. A ride through the bush may settle my nerves a bit——"

"Parson, you and Chillagoe Charlie must often feel the same way," said Peter the Poet. "He is always

in motion, and yet his nerves don't seem to need settling, they're always all right."

"Yes, I believe there is a lot in common between us," the parson answered, with a smile, jumping upon the horse which Mike had just brought for him, ready saddled. "We are both children of the bush and have more said about us than we deserve. In his case bad is said, but with me every one says nice things. None of us deserve what we get in this world, and I am sure Charlie and I could change places and you wouldn't know it."

He rode off as he finished speaking and soon disappeared into the bush, not even looking at the well-defined track which ran nearly parallel with his course.

An hour after he had become lost to view the sun went down and the cook announced that tea was ready. Speculating on what was keeping Sam; if he really *were* Charlie and had cleared out; or if the returning troopers had met him driving the parson's buggy home, and detained him, the men dined, and just as they finished the sound of buggy wheels was heard.

"There's Sam now," exclaimed Mike. "I knew he couldn't be Chillagoe Charlie."

"How do you know, Mike?" asked Peter the Poet. "Is it because you know who has a better claim to the honour?"

"No; it's because Sam has my horse, and if he had anything to do with Charlie, he wouldn't waste time driving a buggy back here when he could be measuring the Gulf country towards the north faster than ever was done before."

"But the man with the buggy must be the fellow who took the sergeant's togs," said Tommy the Kangaroo, forgetting the arguments already expounded for and against this statement.

"Then, Oh, that will be joyful ! an' we won't go home till mornin' !" roared Dave. "This isn't Dirty Sam at all; it's Long Tom, the whitest prospector that ever stuck in his four pegs."

At that moment Long Tom drove into the camp square and halted. It was the parson's buggy, every one could see, and with curiosity strained to the utmost as to how Long Tom came to be driving it, the men gathered round and helped to unharness the horses.

"Am I too late for tucker?" asked Long Tom anxiously. "I came along as fast as I could."

"Long Tom can never be too late for tucker in this camp," answered Mike O'Flannigan. "But how did you come to get those horses and who told you about bringing in the buggy?"

"Dirty Sam told me the parson wanted it, and asked me if I would oblige him by taking it along. He brought me the horses, but wouldn't wait for tea or anything, said he was going north as fast as he could to the Palmer River to stake out claims for you boys on some reef he knows, and which was in danger of being found by the Chinese of that mysterious camp up there——"

"There are some people coming over the buggy tracks," remarked the youthful Tom. "Nigger hears them, and he doesn't seem to think they are friends."

"I'll bet my whiskers it is the troopers back again," said Ginger Bob. "They have nothin' to do but kill good horses ridin' up and down the track between here an' Crocodile Crossing."

"An' Should auld acquaintance be forgot ! you is right !" cried Dave. "They'll be comin' for me this time."

"Troopers," repeated Long Tom. "That is funny; there must be a lot of them in this part of the world."

When we were givin' our horses a spell this forenoon and having a drink of tea a bit off the track, a crowd of them rode past, coming this way, and when I was driving in here with the buggy—I came through the bush so as to miss the sand the traffic has loosened on the track—I heard a mob of them riding out the other way. I think they must have been sent up here to be out of the road, for I am sure there is no need for them in the Gulf country unless they went north and helped the prospectors to wipe out the Chinese den."

"Go in and have something to eat and we'll attend to whoever it is," said Mike O'Flannigan. "If it is the troopers, they ought to get kicked for ill-using their horses, riding up and down that sandy track——"

"Hallo, boss! Who is it this time?" Ginger Bob sang out as it became plain that the visitors were their friends of the forenoon. "We've got a new man here now. Maybe ye can prove that he is the Governor-General of Australia in disguise if ye try yer best."

"We have him this time," the superintendent answered. "We cut the buggy tracks and have followed them through the bush right into this camp. Ah! that is the buggy. Where is the man who drove it?"

"Good old trooper boss!" yelled Hungry Ted, as his comrades prepared to have another fit of laughter. "Come over to the shaft with me an' I'll show ye nine men hidin' down its drives, an' maybe they're all Charlies. And"—he lowered his voice confidentially—"there's another two batches of nine men each down the creek in some tents; they're the other shifts, but maybe——"

But the officer was exasperated, and did not seem to appreciate Ginger's offer of help in finding more likely men.

"Where is the man who drove this buggy?" he demanded. "That is the man we want."

"I drove the buggy. What do you want with me?" spoke Long Tom, coming out into the square and confronting the tired, hungry, and thirsty representative of Queensland law.

"You burnt a trooper sergeant's uniform to-day. How did——"

"You are a jumped-up liar! I——"

"No cheek, Long Tom, or he'll think ye're a member of Parliament," grinned Peter the Poet.

"I am not accustomed to being told I am a liar, my man."

"Arrest him, boss. Arrest him for being Chillagoe Charlie an' callin' ye a skiter when ye told him who he was," cried Ginger Bob.

"Nor am I accustomed to stand any untrue statement being forced down my throat," Long Tom retorted angrily. "I have prospected in every part of Queensland and New Guinea, and my record is clean all through, and you can bet your thief-catcher's job I'm not going to be bullied by a policeman now."

"Hear, hear! Tom," shouted the men in delight at the prospect of trouble arising, and just then Mr. Hornsby appeared.

"When is this foolish business of yours going to cease?" he demanded, trying not to display the temper he felt within him. "This is a mining camp, and we have no time for dramatic entertainments such as you have been providing."

"I am very sorry, sir, that this camp has become a frequent visiting-place of mine, but I can't help it. I am certain that the—no, I won't say criminal, for that has yet to be proved—man I want is harboured here, and you, sir, as a Justice of the Peace in the State

of Queensland ought to help me instead of encouraging your men to throw obstacles in my way."

"All right, then," Mr. Hornsby cried, mollified; "I'll help you all I can, for I have a great desire to know who Chillagoe Charlie really is. He is a gentleman, of that I feel sure."

"Then, sir, don't you see the force of my following up the man who took the buggy from the Crossing? He was seen burning the uniform, or rather a remnant was found after he had left."

"A big difference, officer. This man, although he brought the buggy here, may not have been the man your men saw. Can they make you sure on that point? Long Tom is well known all over the country, and I don't see how he could find time after a hard day's work to go about at night playing the part of Chillagoe Charlie. But let me question him and perhaps we'll get some information. Do you know anything about the burning of some garments, Tom? You can speak to me freely, as you know."

"I know that—that——" began Long Tom, and stopped. He did not wish to incriminate any one.

"Yes, Dirty Sam you mean. Go on," said Mr. Hornsby. "What did he do?"

"He burned something he found in the buggy before he asked me to take it here."

"There you are then, officer; you see that Dirty Sam, the man you went out after when you left here this afternoon——"

"Is my man; but I don't know the difference between Dirty Sam and this gentleman."

"You are away off the track again. I was going to say that as Dirty Sam took the articles of dress he burned from the buggy, it follows that it is the owner of the buggy you should apply to for particulars——"

"And who is he? Where is he?" The superintendent was again greatly excited.

"Come here, boss," said Dave. "Do you see this horse's tracks? You do? Well, that is his. He went out that way some hours ago. If ye carry a candle in front of ye ye'll be able to track him back to camp again. He is the parson."

"Is that so?" the superintendent asked Mr. Hornsby. "Have I been following out clues which led only to those tracks, and if so, were they made by the gentleman known all over the north as the parson?"

"I believe so. Hadn't you better set out after him now?"

"No, I am sick of the whole thing, and our horses are done up now for some days. I don't believe there is such a person as Chillagoe Charlie, and I am going to return south to-morrow. My health won't stand this eternal riding after a will-o'-the-wisp. I am farther away now from knowing who Chillagoe Charlie is than when I started, and I wish I had never heard of him."

"And so say all of us, sir," a trooper put in. "We'll never catch him because he doesn't exist."

"What would be done to him if ye did get him?" asked Ginger Bob thoughtfully. An idea had just occurred to him.

"I don't think anything could be done to him," the officer answered wearily. "No one can give any one evidence against him, and no one will identify him, and all the investigations I have caused to be made do not bring out that he has done anything wrong. He rides about the country in a mask, but that in itself is no crime, and I have no doubt he could easily clear himself."

"An' would you pay the thousand pound reward

just the same?" asked Ginger, still thinking deeply. "'Cos if you would I have a good mind to go out after him myself."

"There will be a dead Ginger Bob found around these parts if ye does," said Hungry Ted.

"No, there won't, Hungry," answered Ginger. "I have a boncer idea, and you are in it. Come out of the crowd till I tell you about it."

"And as Caledonia Camp cannot refuse its hospitality even to troopers who have tried to fix a serious charge upon most of its members from the manager down," laughed Mr. Hornsby, "the men and I invite you to let your horses go, and come and have something to eat and drink yourselves. After that, if you will take my advice, you will camp here for the night, and if you really want Charlie and believe he exists at all, you will scatter yourselves to-morrow and depend more upon trapping him than upon running him down."

"I am too tired to put forth any more ideas of my own," said the superintendent, "and my boys must feel as bad. I thank you for your offer of hospitality, which on behalf of them and myself I gratefully accept. Dismount, boys, and hobble out your animals."

"Yes," said Bullocky Bill, "and I'll show you where you can get water for them." Bullocky was too anxious in his manner for any one to think he had the welfare of the troopers' horses at heart, but Mr. Hornsby spoiled his little scheme by saying, "All right, Bill, you can take the horses to the water, but remember if they stampede you are responsible, and will have to gather them in yourself in the morning."

"I reckon it is blamed hard lines on a well-meanin' fellow," Bullocky Bill grumbled as he realised that his

scheme was ruined, and most of his comrades agreed with him in sympathetic tones.

And thus once more did the troopers find a resting-place in Caledonia Camp, and after an entertainment, at which Peter the Poet recited a poem of his own making, and at which Mike, Long Tom, and young Tom sang, and Nigger performed tricks, they retired to snatch some sleep in any odd corner they could find. Their horses fed peacefully near, the tinkling of their bells being as sweet music in the ears of the good-natured but worn-out troopers.

The darkness became more intense and soon midnight was at hand. Tom and Nigger were both very tired, and had fallen asleep at once on their turning in, Tom into his bunk in the tent, and Nigger under it.

Suddenly Tom opened his eyes, Nigger was standing up and wagging his tail, but looking past Tom. Tom turned his head slightly, and there, behind his pillow, stood Chillagoe Charlie. He made a spring from his bunk, but a hand was laid on his arm and a voice said, "Don't utter a sound, I won't harm you. I have come here to tell you something about your uncle."

"Is he alive?" Tom began, but the masked man held up his hand warningly.

"Don't speak at all," he said in a very low voice. "This place is swarming with sleeping troopers, and it is very silly of me to be here. Your uncle is the leader of a company of prospectors up on the Palmer River. They found the secret Chinese camp, and are working the same gold formation. If you really desire to meet him you must be prepared to run many risks and suffer a lot of inconvenience——"

"I don't care," whispered Tom, "I am going up north no matter what I have to suffer. But what is the

use of your wearing a mask here ? We all know you are Dirty Sam, and——”

“——are making another mistake. Dirty Sam has a game of his own on hand. He will help you to find your uncle, and is now riding north to the Palmer. You must also start to-night. I will put you on Sam's tracks, and you must then ride them down until you make up on him. He expects you, and will not travel too fast. Are you ready to come now ?”

“Yes, but I must tell Mr. Hornsby first. He has been very good to me, and I can't leave the camp like a thief without getting his consent.”

“All right ; come along and we'll call on him and get it. Dress quietly and join me at his house. I must go round outside the camp.”

“But aren't you in great danger just now ? The troopers might shoot you if they saw you.”

“I'll have to risk that, they can't catch me in any other way. My two fast horses are waiting down the creek, and I have already taken the hobbles off theirs and driven them a couple of miles away.”

“That's what Bullocky Bill was going to do to-night, but Mr. Hornsby stopped him. He will be blamed for doing it, in the morning, just the same.”

“Oh, I'll leave a note in his tent telling him where to get them, and he'll not mind bringing them in without complaining when he knows who he is working for. Are you sure you know your own mind about going north ? Don't say you want to go because of me. I never harmed a fly in my life, and I have no intention of using my notorious title to influence people now——”

“I am not afraid of you in the slightest, as I told you last night at the springs, and I am going north to the Palmer River to find my uncle, although there

were a hundred of you on the way, and although all the Chinamen in China and all the aborigines in Australia were leagued to prevent me."

"That's a plain enough statement, so we'll not waste any more time. Make your way cautiously to the mine manager's house, and I will join you there, and when he gives you the permission you desire, we'll clear out. I am going over to Mike's tent now to leave a message."

Chillagoe Charlie walked quietly from the tent, and after pausing at the door a moment to listen if any one gave signs of being outside, he crossed over to Mike's tent and entered it. Next moment he had crossed the dry creek behind the camp and was walking towards the mine manager's house as carelessly as though he owned the entire Caledonia Company's properties.

Tom followed at once and made up on his strange friend at the house. The windows were wide open as were also the doors, air being the chief consideration in all erections in the Gulf country. Chillagoe Charlie stepped quietly on to the verandah, and signed to Tom to do likewise. But he had no time to do anything further, for just then Mr. Hornsby's voice called out, "Who is there? Answer, or I will blow a hole in you."

"Chillagoe Charlie," answered the masked visitor. "I have come to ask leave of absence for one of your men."

"Oh, Chillagoe Charlie," exclaimed Mr. Hornsby, jumping out of bed. "I have been hoping to see you for some time past. Won't you step inside? Excuse my holding a revolver in your face until we become better acquainted. You know, I suppose, you have a strange reputation?"

"Oh, yes; I can't help hearing the stories about me. But you may put down your weapon. I don't think

any one had ever said that Chillagoe Charlie did any harm to any one who did not go out of their way to interfere with him."

"Oh, I don't know, you may give it another name if you like ; but if all is true that is said of you, you are little short of an ordinary bushranger. But never mind, come inside and have a cigar. I suppose you have come to explain away Dirty Sam's disappearance—if you are not that gentleman in person ? "

"No ; Dirty Sam is well able to explain for himself if he wants. I dropped in to ask you if you would allow my young friend of the springs to leave your service. He has an uncle whom he has never seen, somewhere among the Chinese up on the Palmer, and as I happen to know the person very well, I can put the boy on his track. I also happen to know you are going up that way in force very soon, but unfortunately I can't wait down here. These poor troopers might be too much played out to move some day, and I might blunder into their hands."

"By the way, I might as well mention that the trooper superintendent from Brisbane is sleeping in the next room, and as the partition is open at the top, it might be as well if you spoke in a lower voice. But to the point. How do I know that you are speaking the truth when you talk about knowing my young assayer's uncle ? I tell you frankly I don't care about letting him set out alone, or in your company, on the north track."

"He'll not be in my company ; Dirty Sam will look after him. No, please do not light your lamp. That officer might study the lower part of my face and charge some poor boy for my doings because both our chins were innocent of hirsute adornment. Thanks for this cigar ; it is an excellent one. You

might really keep the muzzle of your revolver a little to the left or right of my head. I am worth a thousand pounds, you know, and if you get nervous with the thought that I might have base designs upon the gold you have in that safe for paying the men's wages tomorrow, there is no saying what the result might be."

Mr. Hornsby laughed. "I am not one of the nervous kind," he said. "But how do you know there is a safe in this room? It is too dark to see."

"Professional instinct, I suppose. What is the good of having a name like mine if you can't smell a safe?"

"Get out, Charlie," laughed Mr. Hornsby. "You are no more a safe robber than I am. See, here are the keys of that one; open it if you like while I go and talk to Tom. There is my revolver to you also; you might need it if the superintendent awakes."

Mr. Hornsby flung down his revolver and walked out on to the verandah where Tom was sitting. "Tom," he said quickly, "you have my full consent to go north. I know who Chillagoe Charlie is, and you are safe in his hands. Take some assays on your way up so that we can peg out any good ground when we follow you. You can write me from the Mitchell River, and then from Smith's cattle station on the Palmer, telling me the results, with a rough map. I will send Mike after you as soon as I can get a portable assaying plant stowed away on our best pack-horse. You will find your uncle, I am sure, and I will follow you up as soon as the new manager relieves me."

"Then you approve of my leaving you just now, sir? And will you explain to the parson——"

"Oh, you'll likely fall in with him somewhere on the track yourself, Tom. But go in and tell Charlie you are ready. I'll go down and rouse Mike and he'll

follow you. Fill your pockets with the cigars in the box on the second shelf, too; you'll find that's Charlie's favourite brand."

Mr. Hornsby, sublimely indifferent to the fact that the notorious bushranger was in his house, walked down to the camp, and, greatly surprised at the turn things had taken, Tom made to enter the room.

But he did not go in; at the door he stood abruptly and his heart beat fast. The thin crescent moon had just appeared above the distant ranges, and its feeble light shining in at the open window fell on a gleaming revolver of Government pattern. The weapon was in a man's hand and was pushed over the top of the partition between the room in which Mr. Hornsby and the superintendent slept. Tom could not see what the revolver was aimed at, but it required no brilliant effort to guess. He dropped on his knees and crawled past the door and along the verandah until he reached the window through which he had participated in rifle practice with Mr. Hornsby and the parson. He knew what he was going to do if luck favoured him—and this time it did. Reaching his hand through the window, he felt for the Winchester rifle which he knew should be resting on a shelf underneath, and to his intense satisfaction found it and lifted it outside. He saw that the magazine held some cartridges, and slipping one into the breech, he rested the barrel of the weapon on the window ledge and took careful aim at the glistening revolver and waited for the proper time to fire.

"So I have run you down by accident after all, my notorious friend," the man who held the revolver was saying. "I hate shooting a man who has given me hospitality, but you'll remember you are the first man I suspected, and you should not have been so foolish

as to allow me to sleep in this room if you intended to engage in professional work to-night. Move a step and of course you know I'll fire. I am a dead shot, too, so——"

"So am I, but isn't it a pity to make a mess of Mr. Hornsby's room by shooting in here?"

"I don't want to shoot you, I assure you, but I don't yet see how I am to secure you——"

"You couldn't come from behind that partition and do it in the ordinary way, I suppose?"

"Well, no; there's little romance in a policeman's life, and I know you are my master if I throw away my advantage. I remember the Murgoona episode, you see, Chillagoe Charlie or Mr. Hornsby, or——"

"Mr. Hornsby? I am not Mr. Hornsby——"

"Take off your mask and let us see who you are, then."

"I'd catch cold if I did that. Shall I come into your room and allow you to do it?"

"No, stay where you are. I'll shoot if you move. I am taking no chances."

"Well, shoot. You don't expect that I am going to stand here all night? I'll make a sporting bet that you don't hit me in a vital part——"

A terrific report rang through the house and the revolver flew from the officer's hand.

"Run now," cried Tom, throwing down his smoking rifle; "the whole camp will be out to see what the shot meant."

"And a very fine shot it was," cried his masked friend as he leaped through the window. "I was never so nearly fixed in my life. I have a couple of horses all ready at the big bend down the creek; cut over this way and we'll get round the camp."

"But my dog?" cried Tom as they ran through a



"A TERRIFIC REPORT RANG OUT, AND THE REVOLVER FLEW FROM
THE OFFICER'S HAND."

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patch of spear-grass and plunged into the dense bush. "Nigger has stuck to me all along and I am not going to leave him now."

"You couldn't leave him if you wished ; I hear him panting at our heels now. He must have been with us all the time. What a noise that police officer is making ! He'll be heard in Murgoona. Look ! there's the camp now ; one would think it was a big city from the number of lights."

"They've found out that their horses have been driven away," said Tom. "Hear how they are shouting ! Poor Bullocky Bill will get blamed for everything."

"Oh, he won't mind ; he'll drive the horses back over our tracks and obliterate them. But turn more to the left now ; we're getting too far away from the creek, and we may as well save our strength now, too ; they can't follow us without horses——"

"I hear a horse galloping along the flat on the other side of the creek," interrupted Tom. "The troopers may have taken the camp horses and be trying to head us off."

"No fear ; there was only one horse in the yard and that was Mr. Hornsby's bay mare. That must be the horse we hear now, and either Mr. Hornsby himself or Mike O'Flannigan is the rider. But here is the bend in the creek, and I heard the tinkle of my horse's bell over there. Watch where you put your feet about here ; the bend seems to be the headquarters of almost every variety of snake."

"Nigger will lead us to the horses," said Tom. "He can see in the dark better than we can and he knows we are looking for them."

"They would come themselves in answer to my whistle, but I hitched them to a tree when I left them

for fear they would take a fancy to roll in the water-hole there and spoil the saddles and wallets."

"Here they are," Tom cried, running in the direction whence Nigger's voice was calling loudly.

"And I hear the bells of the troopers' horses about half a mile farther down the creek, so the sooner we are making tracks northward the better it will be for all concerned," responded his strange companion. "I'll take Nigger up with me until we put the Walsh River between us and any who may come after us. Lie low on your horse's back and let it do the steering; our animals know the country better than we do, but you must take care that overhanging branches do not brush you off."

Tom remembered his ride with Mike. It seemed as if a year had passed since then instead of only little more than a couple of rounds of the clock. "I think I can stick on," he laughed. "I have had some experience of night bush riding already. But can you carry Nigger?"

"Easily. Mount and let us be off. We must be far from here at sunrise."

Tom at once got into the saddle and fell in behind his leader, and then in silence, save for the noise of breaking branches and falling timber, the cries of disturbed night birds, and the ringing of hoofs upon occasional ironstone patches, they rode blindly, keeping the stars of the north straight ahead. After an hour's riding they broke through into a clearing and saw underneath them, winding its erratic course westward, the Walsh River. It was not much of a river at this time, consisting only of a series of stagnant water-holes, in which undersized crocodiles and other amphibious creatures endeavoured to keep cool. A stream, shallow and narrow, connected these holes,

showing that there was still a flow in the river, but the many giant cedar-trees which littered the great sandy channel gave silent testimony to the might of the Walsh River when the rains came on ; these trees had been carried on its flood for over a hundred miles.

But Tom had no time to study the Walsh, nor did he even see how the long lines of wild fig-trees on its banks were bent in the direction of its flow, and that high up among their branches were entangled masses of driftage, marking the level to which the river could rise.

They cantered across the wide sandy water-course, and up over the northern bank, then went off at a gallop again. The first flashes of dawn found them still riding to the north, but now they were travelling slowly ; they had got beyond the reach of possible pursuit, and were saving their horses as much as possible.

"Well, Tom," said his companion to him abruptly ; "there are Dirty Sam's tracks now, you can easily follow them yourself. He can't be much ahead, for that spear-grass broken down so near the roots shows that his horse was played out, it was dragging its steps——"

He pointed to where the broken and crushed grass showed signs that a horse had passed along recently. "We have been following these tracks for an hour or more, although I didn't know it," continued the man in the mask ; "but our horses knew it, and kept us right, and now as it is just on sunrise I will say good-morning and leave you——"

"Why, where are you going ?" cried Tom ; "your safety lies north."

"Chillagoe Charlie has never yet been seen in daylight, Tom, and it would be a pity if I gave myself

away to you now. Ride on yourself, you'll find Sam camped somewhere near. I won't be far away from you at any time, but not as Chillagoe Charlie. That person will fade out of existence with the coming of day, probably never to appear again until he is on trial. Keep the horse in remembrance of him, and do not try to find out anything about him. You can run alongside now, Nigger." He allowed Nigger to jump from his seat, and calling out, "Good morning, Tom," he turned and rode behind a bluff before Tom fully realised that he meant to leave him.

"Wait one moment," cried Tom, riding after him; "I know who you are already."

His words were echoed by the bluff which confronted him. The sun shot up; he was alone, and no tracks were visible but his own.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAPTURE

TOM gazed around him like one who had just awoke from a dream. It was broad daylight, and it took him some minutes to come to any decision as to whether his adventures of the night were real or imaginary.

"It must have been a dream," he muttered, at length ; "he told me himself he would fade away at the coming of daylight—at least I dreamt he said that. It must have been that suggestion that woke me up. Of course he would fade away with daylight ; creatures of imagination always do. But what a real dream it was ! And how tired I am ! I feel just as if I had been riding all night. Where am I anyway ? I don't recognise this place at all ; and what am I doing standing in front of a big rock ? Why, I am on horseback, too. And there's Nigger looking as hungry as if he had not had anything to eat for a week. My horse, wherever I got it, is hungry too, or it wouldn't nibble that rank grass. No, it is no dream, it is all real. I have been riding all night with Chillagoe Charlie, and he has just left me for reasons of his own. He must have gone into that rock though, for he disappeared like a shadow. Well, I am on the hunt for my uncle, whom I now

know to be alive and somewhere up in the country which lies ahead ; so come on, Nigger, we'll move on and trust to our luck. I suppose Chillagoe Charlie is really Mike O'Flannigan, unless he is Dirty Sam. In any case, I know I'll find him, whoever he is, waiting for me a little farther on, and I feel certain he'll have breakfast ready. I don't know how he manages his appearing and disappearing, but as he told me not to try to find out, and has shown himself to be my friend, I'll not inquire further into the matter, but take things as they come as a matter of course. Jupiter ! though, one can't blame that superintendent trooper for his mistake. I felt quite sure at first that Mr. Hornsby was the man, then it seemed as if it must be the parson, then Mike, and Dirty Sam, and that tall, black-whiskered prospector. Jove ! it might finish with Peter the Poet, or me, unless it is the superintendent himself, or the sergeant, or O'Brian."

Tom was now riding down the tracks supposed to be those of Dirty Sam, with Nigger running in front looking for something upon which he might make a breakfast. But suddenly Nigger's attention was taken up by events in the rear, and he turned and barked loudly, plainly warning his master that some one was approaching. Tom looked over his shoulder, and sure enough a rider was coming up at rapid pace, his jaded steed showing clearly that it had been ridden more than was good for it during the night. "This will be Chillagoe Charlie as he appears through the day," Tom said to himself. "I wonder if he really thinks I can't see through his little dodge. He simply hid himself and took off his mask, and trusting that the darkness of night would prevent me or any one else from noticing his horse particularly, or his dress, he is coming on now in another character. I had fancied



" 'THIS WILL BE CHILLAGOE CHARLIE AS HE APPEARS THROUGH THE DAY,' TOM SAID TO HIMSELF."

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he would have ridden fast and allowed me to find him in front though, that's what he usually does, and I had hoped to find breakfast ready when I came up with Dirty Sam."

Tom had quite made up his mind as to how Chillagoe Charlie mystified every one, and he had now also reduced the possible candidates for the honour of being that gentleman to two people—Dirty Sam and Mike O'Flannigan. There were some little things he called to mind which did not exactly fit in with that theory, but he reasoned that he had been cheated purposely in each case to prevent him coming to any conclusion. "Ah, well," he said to himself, drawing rein and waiting for the approaching rider to come up. "It's either Sam or Mike, or both, who act the part of Chillagoe Charlie, and both are decent fellows, and I'd better not let them see I have any suspicion. Hallo! it's Mike, after all. Good morning, Mike. You seem to be in a hurry."

"That may be," said Mike, with a laugh; "but you haven't lost much time yourself. I left camp when the racket broke out and have been going ever since. The boss told me to take a pack-horse with some stores and tools, but I didn't get time, the troopers collared everything in horseflesh they could get their hands on, and I had to have a little argument with them before I got away with this one, the boss's bay flier. I've got one or two things in the wallet, however, and likely Dirty Sam has something too."

"Do you think Sam is ahead?" Tom was nonplussed. Mike's voice was entirely different from that of Chillagoe Charlie's.

"Oh yes; he told me before he cleared out from camp that he had an important engagement up on the Palmer, and that after saying goodbye at the Crossing

his first stop would be somewhere about here. I was coming after him on my own account whether the boss had sent me or not. But ride on slowly, we'll come upon him soon."

"Do you know, Mike, that superintendent has imparted some of his strange ideas to me. I thought when I saw you coming behind that you were Chillagoe Charlie, and I wondered why you had not ridden ahead so as to make that seem quite improbable. He and I were companions all night, you know, and he has just left me."

"Boy, for a time I almost got to believe I was Charlie myself, it looked so like it; but I tell you, seeing Charlie and you and I are all friends, that I deliberately tried to make things look that way because I guessed who he really was and saw that if I couldn't draw his hunters off the scent that he was in great danger of being caught. It now seems as if others had thought the same, for all our mates down in camp and some of the Crocodile Crossing boys have also been trying to play a game with the troopers, although I am not sure that they all think it is the same man."

"You think he is Dirty Sam," said Tom; "but after all the surprises and suspicions and mistakes I have experienced, I am inclined to doubt it; in fact, I am beginning to think that there never really was any Chillagoe Charlie, and that each of our friends, seeing trouble likely to come to another friend—not always the same one, as you have said—took upon himself the rôle of the supposed bushranger."

"By your dog's tail! there's a Chillagoe Charlie all right, and I expect we'll have breakfast with him shortly. We're on his tracks now."

"But how can that be when he and I rode together through the night——?"

"Oh, that was easy enough for Sam. There are two tracks there, don't you see, one horse following another. Sam and you rode along here in the dark, making the tracks, then he doubled, and when he struck them again he left you knowing you could run them down easily to where he had first doubled, and where we will find he has circled back to again, and getting breakfast ready in the shape of Dirty Sam. All the same, lad, we needn't make too much of our knowledge."

"No; he doesn't want any one to know, or he would have confided in those whom he knew to be his friends before this. We'll say nothing which might lead him to suspect. But what is your object up here, then? I am trying to find my uncle."

"And I am here to prospect the country around the Palmer and incidentally to help you to do your work, and you'll find Sam is on the same racket. The parson told us both something about that business, and we'll see it through for his sake, as well as for your own, my boy—— Hallo! your dog scents something. Of course, it is Sam's fire; see the smoke rising ahead? He'll make out that he has only got up from sleep, but he'll be as tired as any of us, and his horse will be of little use to-day."

Increasing their pace, they quickly bore down upon the spot where the columns of smoke betrayed the presence of a camp fire. It was as they had suspected. Dirty Sam was the originator of the fire; he was squatting before it, carelessly, cooking some pigeons he had shot, among the ashes. He looked up when he heard the riders approaching and smiled a welcome.

"You couldn't have hit things neater, boys," he said. "There's a decent meal here for three and it is just ready. Fill that billy from the water-hole on your left, Tom; we'll boil it in no time."

"You don't look surprised at seeing us," spoke Mike, dismounting. "Are you long here?"

"I expected you would roll up some time, but I've only been here since an hour before sunrise. That is a good mare of yours, Mike."

"I see it made double tracks," said Mike significantly.

"Oh, no; I had a pack-horse with me. I borrowed it at Crocodile Crossing."

"What?" cried Mike and Tom simultaneously.

"A pack-horse with me, I said—isn't that natural enough? A fellow needs to carry some stores in a country like this; if he didn't he would not go very far——"

"Dirty Sam," said Mike, "where is your pack-horse?"

"Feeding on anything it can find over that rise on your right. But what on earth are you driving at, Mike? And what has my pack-horse done to deserve such attention? Any one hearing you might think I was Chillagoe Charlie."

"Ha, ha!" Mike laughed. "Who could imagine Dirty Sam and that person to be the same?"

"Not you, of course, Mike," put in Sam, with a meaning look at him. "You know better."

"We'll let that matter slide anyhow, although I am beat to know about that third horse. I suppose you are making for that hidden Chinese city on the Palmer——?"

"Look here, Mike, I can't make you out at all. What do you mean by 'that third horse'? I rode north from Crocodile Crossing yesterday to oblige a friend who is not very far away from me just now. I hadn't three horses, I had only two, and it strikes me that that friend has made most of my work useless

by coming over my tracks. You shouldn't have done that, Mike; I knew you would come, but I expected you would ride in from another direction."

Mike was now surprised beyond measure. "What do you mean?" he cried. "They won't follow my tracks; they know the lad was with you, and——"

"Great Southern Cross! Mike, you've got a touch of the sun. Sit down and drink this tea at once."

"I think I could explain most things," put in Tom. "I see what has happened."

"Fire away then, lad," said Dirty Sam. "There seems to be a deal of explanations wanted."

"Mike thinks you are Chillagoe Charlie, and has been trying to draw the troopers after him ever since they struck Caledonia Camp——"

"Great Snakes? I've been trying to do the same for Mike."

"And," continued Tom, "I rode with that gentleman through the night, and if he is not really one of you two, which with all due respect I still think he must be, he is near here now, for he just left me at daylight."

Dirty Sam suddenly perceived the humour of the situation, and rolled back on the ground in a fit of laughter, but Mike was still in doubt. He unsaddled his horse and let it go, and then turned to his comrade. "Dirty Sam," he said, "we have been comrades for a good long time now, and have stood by each other through a fair amount of trouble——"

"True, Mike," responded Sam. "And we're both men over whose past a curtain has been dropped. I have no name, and yours is assumed."

"That is so. Now, remembering all these little things, tell me in one word, are you Chillagoe Charlie or not?"

"No." Sam's answer was certainly to the point, and as Mike realised this, he was startled by the question: "Now, old comrade, answer me in the same way, and remember it makes no difference to me. Are you Chillagoe Charlie?"

"No," promptly came Mike's response, and all three looked at each other.

"I say," Sam said, after a moment's pause, "there's a lot of funny things about this Chillagoe Charlie business. Now you, Tom, you struck Caledonia Camp just about the time it began to be a personal matter there, and you've been pretty well mixed up with him ever since. Do you mind stating if you are, or are not, the gentleman in question?"

"I am not," Tom answered. "But, as I have already said, he is not far away from here just now. Who can he be and what interest can he have in Caledonia Camp or in myself?"

"Well, boys," remarked Dirty Sam, "seeing that he has dissolved into the air, and that our well-meant efforts in each other's behalf were not required, we'll wish the gentleman the best of luck and think no more about him. We'll begin prospecting now, and work our way north into the land of the transplanted Chinamen."

"But what about stores?" asked Tom. "We haven't any."

"I'll ride into O. K. township to-morrow—it can't be more than fifteen miles east from here—and buy a couple of pack-horses and some flour and tinned dog," said Mike, as he made short work of one of the roasted pigeons. "You two can camp here and give the other horses a spell. My own nag—the one you rode, Sam—is easily good for that journey, and it has had an hour or two of a rest already, anyway."

"All right, Mike," Sam agreed. "You might be doing a good turn to Chillagoe by doing that. If the troopers come up this length they'll recognise the single track and follow it, especially if we can make it clear what horse it is that has turned off. Every one knows your horse leaves that peculiar fore-hoof impression in soft sand, and they will think, of course, that if you are not Chillagoe Charlie, that that person got hold of the horse in his usual way, and is making for O. K. While you are away we'll move north to Dillon's Creek, and it will be as near for you to strike us there as to come back here. Have some more tea, Tom."

When breakfast was over the three men erected a shade with some branches, and, stretching themselves beneath it, fell asleep. Meanwhile the horses fed near and recuperated. Early in the afternoon Mike got up and, catching his own horse, rode off to the east, and some time after Sam and Tom were roused by Nigger, who had grown tired of chasing lizards and wished something different to eat. Nigger was always hungry, and for his rather diminutive size got through a remarkable amount of food. He received his share of cold pigeon; then the horses were brought in and saddled, and the journey northward resumed, Nigger running in front and Sam's pack-horse behind. They did not attempt to travel fast, but contrived to reach the creek, which Sam and Mike knew well, at sundown. They had gone along the base of a triangle, the two sides of which, with the apex at the famous copper mining township of O. K., Mike was to traverse.

Letting their horses go, they made themselves as comfortable as possible, and kindled their camp fire, and Sam was just about to prepare a mysterious stew

for supper compounded of almost all the edible substances in the packs, when Nigger staggered into camp with a scrub turkey a good deal larger than himself. He laid the bird at his master's feet proudly, and then waited for his praise. But Tom was at a loss this time; he could not understand how the dog managed to catch such a powerful bird, and he looked inquiringly at Sam for an explanation.

"Oh, it is real enough," laughed that gentleman, throwing aside his materials for the stew and making sundry preparations for cooking the turkey in the ashes instead. "Those birds are so heavy that they can't get on the wing without a long run first. They feed on the ground, you know, and Nigger scented this fellow and caught him before he could bring his flying powers into working order. You have done well, Nigger; we can all have a decent supper now, and enough left to carry us through to-morrow.

While that supper was being prepared, Tom walked down to the edge of the creek, and by the aid of a fire-brand examined its sands. Sam had told him they were now inside the great northern gold belt, and he was burning to find some gold. The creek was trickling slowly over a rocky bed in corners of which patches of black sand glistened. He lifted some of this sand in his hands, and then cried out in delight; the weight suggested that he had come on pockets of stream tin, which, after all, might prove more lucrative to work than alluvial gold.

"What's the matter?" asked Sam, when he heard Tom's shout. "Has a crocodile got hold of you, or have you seen a bunyip?"

"No," replied Tom, rushing into the firelight; "but I've found stream tin or something else——"

"You're right, my lad," laughed Sam. "It is—some-

thing else, but what it is no prospector whom I know has ever discovered—— ”

“ Then you knew this stuff was here ? ”

“ Every man who has crossed the Peninsula knows that stuff is there, but it is of no value to any one. There are some creeks in the Palmer shed the beds of which are covered with that to a depth of at least six inches.”

“ But do you know it isn't tin ? ”

“ Oh yes ; it has been tried for tin by every prospector who came across it ; it's some kind of iron, I suppose.”

“ No, it isn't iron of any kind,” persisted Tom, scratching a small grain with the point of his knife ; “ it is too soft—and heavy.”

“ Don't get excited, lad ; whatever it is, we're going into the country where there's any amount of it. In fact, there's not much of anything else except Chinamen on the other side of the Mitchell River, which we'll cross to-morrow night if we make good headway.”

“ But I am certain this is some mineral of value,” broke in Tom. “ It isn't iron, it isn't antimony, it isn't wolfram, and if it isn't tin it must be either platinum or some of the rarer metals.”

“ I am surprised you haven't said it was a new compound of gold, Tom,” laughed Sam. “ The parson insisted that it was gold and arsenic and sulphur combined, but who ever heard of such a combination ? ”

“ The parson. Did he say that ? Was it the parson we both know ? ”

“ Yes ; there is only one man called The Parson in the Gulf country. He makes it his business to get out among the mining camps where the only form of religion known is that which a man may remember

from his childhood, and where Sunday, as a day of rest, is entirely unknown. I met him first, about a year ago, in such a camp. Peter the Poet and Mike, and some of the other boys you know, were also there. We were mining wolfram at the time, for it was well over a hundred pounds a ton in price, and we were making little fortunes." Sam paused and raked the fire, and Tom waited for him to continue. But Sam evidently thought he had said all that was interesting on the subject, and after a bit Tom broke in upon his musings with, "And did you make your fortunes with the wolfram?"

"No," answered Sam; "the price fell—at least the buyers told us it had fallen—until we couldn't scratch a living out of the business. That camp is now a home for dingoes, every man left it and went off to try his luck hunting for some other metals." Again Sam stopped and became lost in reflection, but Tom was eager to hear all he could about the parson, so he broke in once more. "But what part does this stuff take in all that, and where does the parson come in, in what you have told me?"

"Didn't I tell you? Oh, I forgot, I was dreaming. The parson had been working among us for quite a time, and when we resolved to give the wolfram camp best, he proposed we should all join in a prospecting trip up north. He said he knew where the mysterious Chinese city was, and he believed the beggars were working a marvellously rich gold formation.

"But is there really a settlement of Chinese up here?" interrupted Tom. "I thought the Chinese were prohibited from entering Australia unless under very severe restrictions?"

"That is true; but all the laws that Queensland made, and latterly the Commonwealth, can't keep out



"SAM PAUSED AND RAKED THE FIRE."

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the pigtail. If he landed at Cocktown, or Cairns, or any of the northern ports, of course he could be watched, and made to pay his poll-tax for getting leave to grow fruit and vegetables for his white-skinned brother, who couldn't do that for himself ; but the Chinaman who is content to be a white man's servant isn't the kind we have to deal with. Quite another type is known to the prospector of the Peninsula—a kind who have never paid poll-tax or any other tax, and who did not land at any port in the country, and who are equal nearly, in strength, to the white man, and more than his equal in ingenuity, and as bad as is possible for anything in the shape of humanity to be. They found their way down the Gulf country during the great Palmer River gold rush, and landed from their junks in the shelter of any of the many mangrove swamps which lie at the mouth of nearly all the rivers which empty into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Thence, they went up these rivers, and being able to live on rice alone, they very soon found out what the white prospector knew, but couldn't act upon because of his inability to live in the country without sufficient food. The history of the Palmer River rush is a sad record of man's lust for gold, but the world does not know that of the thousands who left their bones there, more were killed by the yellowmen than died of starvation, as is believed, or at the hands of the aborigines, which some more enlightened people think. However, that is past long ago, but the Chinese still work the great gold deposits, and in spite of the efforts of our Custom collectors, fine fellows though they be, and the might of the British squadron in Sydney Harbour, their junks still come down from China with men, rice, opium, and other things, all of which are disembarked in the swamps along the Gulf's shores, and

all of which eventually get into the heart of the land we are about to enter. I have gone right up to Cape York before though and never even seen a Chinaman, and the overland telegraph line to Thursday Island runs through the Peninsula all the way."

"But what about the prospecting trip the parson proposed?" Tom asked. "I have some reasons for believing that I have an uncle somewhere up among the ranges which flank the Palmer River, that's why I am so interested."

"What is his name?"

"The same as mine. Tom Willoughby."

"No, I don't know him." Sam mused. "The parson is the likeliest man to know about him. He told me to come up here and help you to look for him."

"The parson knows him well. It was he and Chillagoe Charlie who told me about him."

"A strange couple to be associated, Tom. Our turkey is nearly ready now."

"But you haven't told me about the prospecting trip yet?"

"I seem horribly forgetful to-night. I wish Mike would turn up. Oh, about the trip? We started off all right and passed up over this creek just about here. We got up the Palmer country, and there some of the boys brought in some of that black stuff you found down in that creek, and wanted to know what it was. Most of us had seen it before and laughed at him, but the parson, after working with it all day and all night, said it was what I told you, and although few of us believed him—we thought he was mistaken, I mean—we ran the stuff down from where it came from, and while doing so fell in with a mob of Chinese. They were as mad as though we had dropped into one of the forbidden cities of China, and, by Jupiter! it looked

as if we had from the number of them, and they came at us like a swarm of wild cats. Well, to cut the yarn short, we had to clear out and leave the field to them. About this time Mr. Hornsby was in charge of an expedition prospecting for copper, and after being bested by the Chinese we met his party. We all wanted to go back and see what the Chinese had found worth fighting for, but, strangely enough, it was the parson who objected. He put Mr. Hornsby on the track of what are now the Caledonia Mines, and as many of our fellows who cared to take work were employed by him to develop the various properties he took up for that company. The parson danced about as usual; sometimes he would drop into Caledonia Camp and thrash Dave for swearing, or take a turn down the big shaft, but before we got up in the morning he most likely would have cleared out for some other camp, and we wouldn't hear of him again for a month or so. He always had the idea of going back to the Palmer River for that confounded black stuff, but wouldn't hear of our going in force and fighting the Chinese. I know Mr. Hornsby and he have made arrangements to come up as soon as the new mine manager arrives, but if they hope to prospect peaceably and thus avoid trouble with the yellowmen they will be disappointed; I know the pigtailed too well, and I also know they have found something good or they wouldn't have risked a fight with such a party as we were."

"But we are going in among them now?"

"Yes; but we'll take the plan Mike and some mates of his adopted. They went up as niggers, and the Chinkies ignored them. It would be a bit awkward, though, if we fell in with the genuine aborigines while they were holding a big corroborree. I expect that

uncle you talk about must have been a sham nigger too, if he really was working up in the Palmer Ranges."

"I don't know; but the parson knew him, and Chillagoe Charlie says he is still there."

"All right, Tom; before long we'll be there too and we'll best the yellowskins someway."

"Do you think it is this stuff they are working?"

"No; catch them wasting labour on anything that has no value——"

"But they may have discovered that it has a value. The Chinese are very ingenious."

"Perhaps; and after you discovering gold in that reef down at Crocodile Crossing I am quite ready to believe there may be some valuable mineral hidden away under that black surface.—But look at your dog. What's wrong with him?"

"He hears something and doesn't know yet whether he should bark or not. He is used to judging for himself, and would never wake me by barking when we were on the track together, unless there were good reasons for it." Tom patted Nigger affectionately. "What is it, Nigger?" he said. "Surely not Chinamen already?"

Nigger still stood with ears alert, but suddenly he gave vent to what was meant for a reassuring bark and lay down before the fire. He had no other troubles at that moment.

"By Jupiter! that dog has wonderful hearing powers," exclaimed Dirty Sam, as the sound of horses coming along at a trot began to strike his ears. "He heard them long before we did; but why is he lying down now?"

"He knows we have nothing to fear," answered Tom. "It must be Mike."

"It is; I can make out the ring of his own animal's

hoofs, apart from the others. The horse he rides treads as though it knew it had few equals. It was it that first led me to suspect Mike was Charlie, for with it a man might well be in Murgooona to see the train come in, and appear at, say, Crocodile Crossing a couple of hours after, as Charlie seems to have done."

"But I understand that that gentleman has been seen at different places at the same time—at least, that is commonly believed."

"Which goes to show that there are two people playing the Chillagoe Charlie game—but this is Mike all right, and he's got a couple of heavily laden pack horses with him."

Dirty Sam had thrown some light scrub on the fire so as to make a blaze for the benefit of whoever was approaching, and the shout with which Mike signified that he saw the camp told who he was, and presently he rode up to the fire and dismounted.

"I am sorry you waited supper for me, boys," he said, eyeing the turkey which Sam now hauled from the ashes and prepared to dissect with his sheath-knife. "I waited in O. K. township after I was ready to start to hear if Chillagoe Charlie escaped. He was caught to-day—— But, my word, boys, that's a supper fit for two kings, three kaisers, four emperors, and a prospector, and I'm so hungry——"

"Chillagoe Charlie caught!" cried Tom in amazement. "That is impossible. He only left me this morning, and——"

"Where was he caught?" asked Sam. "I'll bet my supper they'll not hold him long, and I'll bet my next meal too that it isn't him they've got. It will be some beggar the superintendent never saw before; maybe the new mine manager of the Caledonia Company's mines——"

"Like enough," agreed Mike. "Anyhow, it was at Caledonia Camp it happened. You'll find some tin pannikins in 'that off-pack, Tom; I bought some in O. K. for holding our tea——"

"But it can't be Chillagoe Charlie," persisted Tom, not heeding Mike's remark. "Is there a telegraph or telephone system to O. K. from Murgooona?"

"Not yet, but the O. K. mine owners are busy fitting up a connection now," answered Mike. "What did you want to do? Wire to Charlie?"

"No; I wanted to prove to myself that it can't be that person who is caught. How far is O. K. from Murgooona or from Caledonia Camp?"

"About sixty miles. But say, boys, when is supper to begin? I'm ready any time."

"Fire away then, Mike," rejoined Sam, passing him a leg of the turkey. "Excuse the absence of plates and use your own knife. Sit down to what fare your dog has provided, Tom."

"Youngster, you are taking Charlie's fate too much to heart," said Mike, as he proceeded to attack his supper. Tom was standing by the fire apparently indifferent to supper.

"It can't be Charlie," he suddenly broke out. "How could he get back to camp after leaving me this morning a good fifty miles away?"

"A good horse could do it, lad," Sam said, "and in all probability Charlie has a few of them feeding about parts he knows best himself. He could—as we discussed to-night already—have reached Caledonia Camp about ten o'clock this morning, although he must be a wonder to sit in a saddle night and day."

"But if there is no telegraph between O. K. and the south, how could news travel up there since then?"

"Oh, the black fellows can send news in some

mysterious manner faster a good bit than a North Queensland train could carry it——”

“You needn’t go into that point,” interrupted Mike ; “Charlie himself can do better than that. He must have discovered the secret of transmitting himself through the air, or something like that. I don’t know anything about the time when he fell into the hands of that smart superintendent, but the story is all over O. K. that he was seen galloping out of Murgoona in the midst of a cloud of dust which travelled like a cyclone, and ten minutes later was found in the horse yard of Caledonia Camp twenty miles away. He was as fresh and cool as a crocodile under the Barron Falls, and the troopers couldn’t find any horse, sweating or otherwise, anywhere near——”

“Oh, get out, Mike. He couldn’t cover the distance in ten minutes, even although he had a relay of Melbourne Cup winners waiting all along the track.”

“Well, you or I couldn’t do it, Sam, but he is Chillagoe Charlie. Of course, I don’t believe that all the troopers in the country could hold him long, and I waited in O. K. expecting to hear that he had slipped from them again, but no news came through.”

“Sit down and take your supper, Tom,” Dirty Sam said kindly. “We’re all disposed to be friendly towards Charlie, and he’ll likely have escaped by this time. If not, they cannot harm him, for no person, so far as I can gather, can lay any specific charge against him. His reputation has been made for him by a people who crave for the romance of the early days. There is none of that at present in life in the great Gulf country, so they attempt to create some by investing the man known as Chillagoe Charlie with all sorts of miraculous powers, and without meaning any harm, get him into trouble with the law of the country,

the breaking of which, with Australians—I am an Australian, born and bred, myself—has ever exercised a sort of rudimentary fascination——”

“Dry up, Sam, and attend to business,” growled Mike. “Come on, boy, fill up your pannikin of tea and drink to the health of Charlie of Chillagoe, and the confusion of his enemies, if he really has any——”

“I don’t believe he has been caught at all,” said Tom, sitting down to supper. “It is impossible that any man could ride hundreds of miles in a few hours——”

“There’s that dog’s ears up again, Tom,” interrupted Dirty Sam. “This part of the world seems to be getting as crowded as the part we have left.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it were Chillagoe Charlie himself,” said Mike. “He always drops down unexpectedly wherever he goes.”

Nigger gave a joyous bark and went on with his supper.

“It is some one Nigger knows, at anyrate,” said Tom, “so we may conclude that we know him too.”

And they did. Just then the sound of hoofs rang out, and shortly after the parson rode up and dismounted with a cheery “Good-night.”

“Great Australia !” exclaimed Sam. “Did you drop from a balloon, parson ?”

“No ; I happened to be riding along when I cut tracks which when I examined them by the light of a match I knew to be made by Mike’s horse. I was hungry, and preferring to dine with whoever was riding the horse to going in to O. K., I followed them, and here I am. Hullo ! Tom ; you’ve got north very soon, after all.”

“Yes ; I have started to look for my uncle ; but you never said you were coming this way ?”

"He never says where he is going," spoke Mike. "But let your horse go, parson, it looks tired, and join in on this attack upon Turkey. "We'll get all the news, and give all we have later."

"But not to-night, boys ; I've been in the saddle all day, and feel very tired."

"We've been riding all last night ourselves," said Dirty Sam.

"And we'll turn in and sleep without saying a word after we've dined," proposed Mike ; and his words seemed to give expression to the desires of all.

Soon after, the four men and the dog were stretched upon the ground round the camp fire fast asleep.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAMP AT THE MITCHELL RIVER

ALL through the sultry night they slept, but when the sun's first rays shone over the eastern ranges they awoke and went for a swim in a large water-hole in the creek. Then Dirty Sam set about preparing breakfast, and Mike, Tom, and Nigger went out to look for the horses. About eight o'clock in the morning they were on the move again, Nigger leading, the riders following, and the three pack-horses bringing up the rear. The pack animals needed no attention, being well trained to follow a rider on their own account.

The parson fell in with the party as naturally as if it were an organised expedition of which he was a duly appointed member. He asked no questions, and appeared to forget that his presence in the company had not yet been properly explained. At length Dirty Sam thought it was time some explanations were given on both sides, and, riding alongside the parson, he began—

"Did you ever see four better-matched horses than those we are riding just now, parson? I don't think another four like them could be easily found in North Queensland."

"Perhaps not," agreed the parson. "That is Mr. Hornsby's bay mare you are riding?"

"Yes; and Mike is on his own. But you have an animal I never saw before, and which I am sure wouldn't be last in a rush race."

"It is a fairly good piece of horseflesh; I have had it for some time now. But where did Tom get his mount?"

"You wouldn't guess in a year, parson; he got it in a present from Chillagoe Charlie——"

"Dear me, is that so? It is certainly a noble animal, too."

"You haven't asked what we're doing up here, parson, and how the best horseflesh in the country comes to be under us?"

"No; I concluded you had your own reasons, which you would tell me if you thought it advisable. I am going up north on a visit to some prospectors' camps near the Chinese headquarters. I have been there before, you know, and have some influence over the men. I hope to be able to help Tom, too, but I daren't raise his hopes. His uncle, Tom Willoughby, worked among the Palmer River camps for a long time, and I knew him very intimately."

"Well, that's a bit strange; Mike and I are on the same business. I must say, of course, that when I left Caledonia Camp to bring along your buggy from Crocodile Crossing I had little intention of doing any such thing. Matters looked so bad against Mike that my one idea was to draw the troopers after me so as to give him a chance——"

"Draw the troopers after you? What do you mean, Sam? Why should you draw the troopers after yourself?"

"I thought Mike was Chillagoe Charlie."

"Oh ! " The parson was very much surprised.

"Yes, and the best of the joke is he thought the honour was mine."

"Mike did ? " The parson seemed to be even more surprised.

"He did ; and Mr. Hornsby thought it rested between the two of us, so he gave Mike his best horse to come up after me and keep Tom and I company."

"Tom ? Where does he come in in this story ! "

"Oh, it would make me too thirsty if I tried to get through the whole story, parson ; you'll have to fill in the blanks for yourself. Anyway, I sent Long Tom back with your buggy, and cut up north from the Crossing, making good tracks for any one to follow——"

"Yes, I cut your tracks, and also saw that you had sent the buggy to camp. I had some business to attend to in Murgoona, however, and it was not until next morning I was able to follow you up."

"You came mighty quick, then, parson."

"Yes ; I enjoy rapid travelling. There is an exhilaration in flying through the air on the back of a creature full of life."

"By Jupiter ! there must have been a lot of people having exhilaration about that time, then, for Chillagoe Charlie—the genuine article—struck the camp and hauled Tom away with him on that horse he is riding now. The best of it, too, is that he held up Mr. Hornsby and got him to allow Tom to go. The camp was full of troopers at the time ; they were all half mad, Tom says, and had been seeing Chillagoe Charlies everywhere they went all day. Anyhow, Charlie and he and his dog cleared out, and Mr. Hornsby, thinking, I suppose, that I was Charlie, sent Mike up after them with orders to tell me when he saw

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me—without the mask, of course—to go up north prospecting until the excitement died down——”

“But you are not Chillagoe Charlie?”

“No more than you are, parson. Why, what are you laughing at?”

“The idea. But where is Charlie now?”

“Don’t know; he left Tom at daylight saying he wouldn’t likely appear again, and Mike heard in O. K. last night that he had been caught——”

“Nonsense. Chillagoe Charlie has not been caught. I—I—well, I know, or at least I suspect, that the excited superintendent has accused Psalm-singing Dave, or Peter the Poet, of being the man; he had already been round most of the others. No, no, they’ll never catch Chillagoe Charlie; but I have a notion, somehow, that he may give himself up after the excitement has died down.”

“Why should he do that? He would be a mighty fool——”

“I don’t know. He has done nothing, so far as I can gather, and only by that means can that fact be proved. The law is just, you know; it is British.”

“Well, every one in this party wishes him luck, anyhow; and none of us would mind going out of our way to help him. I don’t mean to include you, parson; you couldn’t be expected to countenance such a thing, although you are more of the man than the parson——”

“Nevertheless, Chillagoe Charlie has no better friend than this same poor parson, Sam, and he will certainly go out of his way more than you can imagine to help him. But let us change the subject. Mr. Hornsby and some of the boys are coming up here afterwards, I believe. We arranged that matter, I think, before I left Caledonia Camp.”

"Why did you leave Caledonia Camp, parson? It is the finest camp in the Gulf country."

"I left it in the interests of the gentleman we have been talking of, much the same as you did."

"Then you know him personally?" Sam was now surprised.

"I do, Sam; but you must excuse my not giving him away, even to you; he is certainly a friend of yours, but more than that I will not say just now. You will probably know all, and be very much surprised very soon. Look at that dog. What is the cause of its excitement?"

"Tom will know; it seems to be a bit suspicious of something. Come here, Tom; what is Nigger thinking about now?"

Nigger was sniffing the ground and running up and down with a reckless disregard of the distance he was adding to the probable day's journey.

"He has got on to the scent of something he wishes us to look into," Tom answered, riding alongside.

"He doesn't care about tackling the job himself."

"It will be a big snake, most likely," said Mike, also coming up. "I once killed one over twenty feet in length not far from here."

"No, it isn't a snake," the parson said. "We would see its trail where it crossed the sand, and also the wavy line it would make through that spear-grass."

"Go on, Nigger," cried Tom; "nose him out, we're with you."

"With a bark, plainly expressive of delight, the dog bounded into the tall grass which flanked the cattle pad along which they were riding, and, running with a series of leaps, so as to avoid treading on hidden reptiles, led the way to a clump of palms which grew near.



"HE WAS CLAD IN WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN A STIFF WHITE SHIRT,
AND A HELMET, BUT NOTHING MORE."

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"It is a man," cried Mike, "I saw him move; he is hiding behind a tree."

"Maybe it is Chillagoe Charlie," said Tom, following hard on Nigger's tracks.

"A native!" ejaculated Dirty Sam. "What on earth is he hiding from us for?"

A lean, wiry aboriginal had broken from the timber and was racing through the long grass towards a distant creek. He was clad in what had once been a stiff white shirt, and a helmet, but nothing more, and the men laughed to see the figure he cut, running through the sharp, bristly grass with Nigger in hot pursuit.

"Stop, you over-dressed ace of spades," Sam roared; "we won't eat you."

But the native ran on unheedingly.

"Poor beggar! let him go," said Mike. "His experiences of the white man have not been happy."

"No, boys," the parson put in; "we must round him up. There is something suspicious in an aboriginal of these parts running away from white prospectors. They have always been very friendly towards each other."

Before he had finished speaking Mike had almost reached the runner, his steed, in response to a word from its master, having darted from the others with a show of its well-known speed.

But the aboriginal doubled and twisted and made off on a fresh track, and before Mike's horse could check its impetuous course he had gained a considerable distance. It was energy uselessly expended, however, on his part, for now Tom, Sam, and the parson, not to mention Nigger, were galloping to surround him, and seeing this the man suddenly sat down on the ground and called out, "Goo' morn."

"Good morning," responded Tom, who was nearest to him. "Why did you run away?"

"What fellow boss in this crowd?" the native demanded, ignoring Tom's question. "This black fellow got no use for any fellow no' boss."

Tom fell back amazed at the fluency and the nature of the man's language.

"You've got a mighty big amount of cheek anyway, old black-and-white," spoke Mike. "We're all bosses here, so spit out your story quick an' lively. Why did you run away?"

"White fellow bosses no' give black fellow away if him tell?" The native certainly did not seem to be in the slightest manner worried about his present position.

"No, we're square men. What is your special trouble?" Sam asked encouragingly.

"Have a drink, old White Shirt," said Mike, indicating a water-bag hanging round his horse's neck.

"Hims name not White Shirt," spoke the native with great dignity. "Hims name the Bishop. Hims big chief too, an' hims got good edicate at Mission Reserve for niggers——"

"Oh, you are a Mission School man, then?" the parson said. "I suppose you are out on the walk-about just now?"

"No fear; Bishop no such big fool. What hims want to go on the walkabout for? Plenty other fool white fellow for that. Old chief die, an' hims the Bishop come out to tell his tribe they blame silly fools to stay here when Queensland Government give plenty tucker an' baccy for do nothing down in Reserve."

"And what did your people say?" asked the parson.

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"They no say nothing. Want to make him hold big corroborree ; make him walk the fires. Him no like that, no care hang for corroborree. Then they want to kill him, him no like that too, an' him scoot, you bet, quick an' lively. God save the King——"

"Thenigger reminds me of some one," Mike mused. "Oh, yes, Psalm-singing Dave——"

"Were you scooting now?" the parson asked a trifle anxiously.

"You bet, him do big scoot. Got any tucker for Bishop?"

"Here you are," said Dirty Sam, handing him a piece of cold turkey from his saddle-bag. "You'll get some tobacco when you tell your yarn."

"What more you give if him tell him yarn?"

"I'll give him a thrashing him will not forget for some time," said the parson, who knew the nature of the aboriginal well. "I know you are keeping back something, and I'll see that there is no more tucker nor baccy at the Reserve for Bishop if you don't hurry up with your story."

"You no' play the game. Why you no trade like other white fellows? Bishop him got something to sell, him story worth whips o' baccy an' some two-three bob." The Bishop had up to this point remained seated upon the ground, but he now arose and drew his solitary garment around him with the gesture of a Roman emperor.

"We'll trade for your story if it is worth it after you have told it," said the parson. "I give you white fellows' word for it."

"You couldn't raise couple o' bob first?" asked the Bishop doubtfully. "White fellows' word all right, but it am very blamed hard for him to know

who is white fellow square, an' who is white fellow half with eyes in wrong place an' hims tail on hims head."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Mike; "he says he can't tell the difference between us and Chinamen. Look here, you—you son of the Great Austral Land, I have no tail at the back of my head; I am a white fellow through and through, and it won't wash off." He removed his hat as he spoke, and a seraphic smile lit up the Bishop's face.

"You all the same?" he inquired. "All dead straight white fellows?"

"All dead straight white fellows," repeated the parson. "So you can safely tell us anything, and if what you say is worth anything to us we'll pay you."

"Then listen. Hims, the Bishop, comes out to hims own people from Reserve, soon——"

"He means recently," put in Dirty Sam for Tom's benefit.

"Here you," cried the Bishop angrily. "What you mean stop hims speak? My word! God save the King! hims goo' mind to say another word not——"

"I beg your pardon, Bishop," said Sam contritely; "I'll not interrupt again."

"Hims people no' want him, an' no' believe what he tell of plenty tucker for do nothing in Reserve. They want make hims go through big corroborree, but hims no like to walk through fires. Black fellows no like him to say hims no like do that. They get ready to kill hims. But hims no wait. Hims scoot. Byambye hims meets a lot o' fellows with tails in their heads. Hims no know if they white fellows or not. They no' talk straight, an' eat too much rice, an'

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no' live as other white fellows live. Hims no understand' them, an' them faces like colour o' too old bananas. They give him plenty baccy an' whips o' fire-water to drink, an' hims get big friends. Hims tell them hims big chief o' black fellows, an' they tell hims if he makes hims black fellows come kill all blamed white fellows dig up creek near—not the same fellows as them—they give plenty more baccy an' plenty more fire-water——”

“Great Melbourne !” gasped Mike. “The Chinese tried to get the natives to wipe out the prospectors. Go on, Bishop, what did you do ?”

“Oh, hims no like to go back to hims own people. Hims no like get killed, hims think very good plan to cut for big white fellows' township, an' tell Mr. Government man what men with tails on them head say. I on way to do that now. How much you give me for wat hims tell ? White fellows give word he give something.”

“Oh, yes, we'll give you something,” said the parson. “Your story is well worth paying for. Here are two half-crowns for you, and you can buy tobacco in the first township you strike——”

“Hims only git two,” wailed the Bishop. “Make it three bob, boss——”

“You are too greedy,” laughed Dirty Sam. “But seeing you are a big chief and talk remarkably plain English, here is a handful of pennies to you. Don't spend them recklessly, and don't take too much fire water.”

“My word ! God save the King, boss, you must be plenty big boss,” said the native, surprised at the amount of money he was getting. Like all aborigines, no matter how long they have been trained in station or elsewhere, he had no knowledge of numbers

that could not be expressed by the fingers of one hand. Dirty Sam had given him eight pennies and two halfpennies; where or how they came into his possession would probably be beyond his powers to tell, for copper coins are never seen in the Gulf country interior, and only seldom in the ports of Cairns and Cooktown. But the Bishop was greatly delighted, they were the same to him as sovereigns, and would probably be of as much service to him. If he entered a store or saloon with the golden coin it would be taken from him with scant ceremony, and no change given, the assumption being that he had stolen it, whereas when he placed down his penny in payment for a cheap looking-glass or piece of red ribbon the storeman would only smile and tell him to bank his money as the glass or ribbon was a present. Of course he could always get food whenever he asked for it in camp or in settlement.

"You did quite right, Bishop," said the parson, after the packs had been ransacked for some tobacco for him. "These men you met were not white fellows. They very bad fellows. You go and tell your story to the first Mr. Government man you meet and he will give you more two-three bobs and plenty of bacca."

"You no want to wait hims longer?" inquired the Bishop, gazing at the sun to see how much time he had to reach where he intended to camp that night.

"No; you may go now. Follow our tracks and you will get into O. K. this afternoon."

"No blamed fear, no O. K. for Bishop. Hims been there before. Big bunyip hole there."

"Well, if you cut over to the sun when he falls down you will find tracks that will lead you down to a

big camp where plenty good white fellows work. If you run fast you will get there by to-morrow's sundown."

"Oh, hims run like a nigger. Hims know black fellows behind hims an' no want stop. God save the King! Hims off——" He darted away with the peculiar jig-jog trot common to natives and others whose lives are cast in the land of distances, and after watching him until he became lost in the belt of scrub through which they had passed that morning, they resumed their journey.

"What do you make of his story, parson?" Mike asked as they entered upon an ironstone plain, which allowed them all to ride abreast. "Don't you think the beggar was lying?"

"No, I am sure he told the truth. I know the natives of these parts well. They are not yet civilised enough to know how to lie outright, although they can prevaricate without any trouble, and convey wrong impressions."

"Isn't that rather a fine distinction, sir?" said Tom, "and didn't he lie to the Chinese?"

"I don't think so. The native mind is not quick enough to invent a lie, but it can twist facts considerably. Again, his brain does not always catch the drift of what you say—either he really doesn't comprehend the language used, or doesn't believe in hurting himself thinking,—but as it requires no effort to concur in anything said or suggested, he will, by agreeing to everything you say, often mislead you. But our friend the Bishop got no help from us in telling his story, therefore it must be true. Of course, he pretended not to know who the Chinese were, whereas if he is a Reserve native he must be quite familiar with them. Doubtless he had some reason for that, but it

didn't cheat us, and now we know there is danger ahead——"

"But surely, sir, the Chinese won't——"

"I wasn't thinking of the Chinese just now, Tom. It is the aborigines the Bishop is running from whom I expect will first cause us trouble. You know, this land, although an integral part of White Australia, and peopled by citizens of the Commonwealth more or less, is really beyond the reach of the law, and at present there is a three-cornered fight going on to determine who shall ultimately be masters of the country. It is a war between white, black, and yellow, and I am inclined to think, with some of our best statesmen, that the whole Gulf country will in time be a blot of yellowskins. However, that question does not concern us in the meantime, and there is no use anticipating trouble. All the same, I wish I had thought of asking the Bishop where he had left his own people."

"I reckon we'll find that out in good time," Dirty Sam remarked. "It is a pity that only Mike has a rifle. We've all got revolvers, however, and plenty of ammunition."

"I have a rifle too—in fact, I have a couple of them," remarked the parson, gazing straight ahead.

"Great Scott! Where?" cried Mike and Sam simultaneously, looking in vain for signs of such a weapon in the parson's outfit, which he carried in a wallet in front of him.

"In that wallet," answered the parson. "They are a new type of Winchester, and the barrel unscrews from the stock very simply, so as to make them portable."

"Jupiter! parson. I never knew you were a portable arsenal," laughed Dirty Sam.

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"Have you got anything else in that wallet, parson?" asked Mike curiously.

"Not very much, but I fancy its contents would surprise you all greatly, nevertheless."

"Boys, I am hungry," observed Mike irrelevantly. "Shouldn't we halt for a spell until the sun stops getting at the top of our heads, and boil the billy?"

"A good idea," the parson agreed. "We'll dismount in that cedar-wood patch half a mile ahead, and give the animals a spell. We can make the Mitchell River before dark."

"Let's race the distance, then," cried Dirty Sam. "I'll back my own nag——"

In a second the four riders were flying towards the camping-ground with the pack-horses and Nigger following as well as they could. But Sam would have lost had any one taken up his challenge, for Tom reached the place first, the others arriving in a bunch together.

"My word, kid! but you've got a horse that money wouldn't buy if it were mine," cried Mike. "My nag was supposed to be the fastest goer up north, but yours—— My! It was a sight to see her."

"I can easily see how Chillagoe Charlie could run rings round the troopers," commented Dirty Sam admiringly. "If that is a horse he could afford to give away, what must the one he rides himself be like? All the same, parson, I don't think you gave your animal a chance. I saw you hauling him in——"

"Only for a moment, Sam; I thought we were going to collide with you."

Just then the pack-horses came up, Nigger imagining he was in charge of them, and soon their packs were removed, and hobbles placed on their feet. The

saddle horses were not hobbled; they would not leave the others, and their riders wished to give them as much liberty as possible. Soon the billy, filled with water from the water-bags carried round each horse's neck, was boiled, and the men sat down in the shade until the sun was well down towards the west, and then, gathering in the horses, they saddled up and went off again, as fresh as though they had not ridden a mile that day.

The country was now changing rapidly, and the dwarfed scrub and spear-grass of the plains began to give place to large iron-bark and bloodwood-trees, while great ranges closed in from east and north. At sundown they were still picking their way over country very difficult to negotiate, but as they had no water they could not afford to stop, and it was two hours later when they descended a long slope which seemed to extend to the base of the mighty range shutting off the north, and came to a large, swiftly flowing waterway.

"The Mitchell River, Tom," cried the parson. "To-morrow we cross that range on the other side, and then our first water is the Palmer, or its tributary creeks."

"And as we have nothing but tinned dog in our larder I am going to fish for our supper," put in Dirty Sam. "You might look after my horse, Tom, while I set about it."

"But you have no means of catching fish," cried Tom, wondering how Sam intended to provide the supper.

"Oh, yes, I have, but it is a bit low down on the fish and everything else in the pool I try, and I wouldn't do it if we could manage any other way." Sam produced a detonator from his pocket, and closed

it on a piece of fuse by means of his teeth. "I owe Caledonia Company the price of this shot," he remarked casually. "I happen to have had the stuff in my pocket when I left camp, and it will be useless if I keep it until I can return it." He sunk the cap in a plug of gelignite, likewise hauled from some recess in his dilapidated garments—Sam was very careless—and lighting the fuse he flung the whole into the water. One minute after there was a dull report and a shower of warm spray fell over the party, and next moment Sam and Nigger were in the pool catching all sorts of fish which floated to the surface, along with baby crocodiles of sizes ranging from that of a man's hand to the length of an arm. The larger creatures were not killed, however, and quickly recovering, disappeared in the depths again, but between the efforts of Sam and Nigger, both of whom seemed to be amphibious, a plentiful supply of nice fish of a kind Tom had never before seen were thrown out upon the bank, and the parson lost no time in transferring them to the ashes of the fire he had kindled while Mike and Tom attended to the horses.

Half an hour later all sat down to supper, and Tom, always eager for knowledge, inquired how the explosion of a plug of gelignite thrown into the water could kill so many fish.

"Don't know," answered Sam. "I expect it is the concussion. I hate to kill them that way, but they would all have gone to feed the crocs sooner or later anyway, and we're just as deserving as them, I reckon."

"Hadn't we better keep a watch to-night?" suggested Mike, who had a wonderful knack of changing subjects. "If niggers are about they'll cut out our horses."

"This Nigger will let us know if any one comes near," said Tom. "He'll bark if there is anything he doesn't understand, and he can see further in the dark than we can."

"All right, we'll leave it to Nigger," agreed the parson. "I am sure he is worthy of the trust."

"Say, you fellows, this riding all day business is a long way harder work than jumping steel drills down a mine, and I've been wondering what sort of a man Chillagoe Charlie must be to stand it."

"He will be very much like other men, Mike," the parson said. "You know, it is wonderful how one gets used to anything. Probably he doesn't think it hard work at all."

"He'll be like you then, parson," Dirty Sam laughed. "You are the freshest man in this crowd to-night, and yet you can't have ridden nearly so much as Mike and myself these last few years."

"Possibly not, Sam; but I wouldn't swear to that fact. However, we can turn in and sleep till sunrise, and then we'll be as fresh as Chillagoe Charlie ever was——"

And soon the stars shone down on four sleeping men and a dog; the dog was also sleeping, but his eyes were open and his ears were twitching as if even in his sleep he was listening. Near by the seven horses nibbled the tops of the coarse grass, their musical bells sounding clearly on the warm night air.

Suddenly Nigger cocked his ears and next moment the camp was awake, roused by his warning bark. Something was coming, they all knew, but it was some minutes before any one could detect any sounds. The parson was the first to hear anything. "It is a horseman," he exclaimed, "and he has a pack-horse

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with him. Draw back from the fire until we see who he is——”

The party drew into the shadows and soon a man galloped up, followed by a pack-horse. Both horses were steaming and the man looked very much exhausted. But he also seemed familiar to every one, although his features could not be plainly made out. He halted at the fire, and seeing the billy standing near, he dismounted and drained it of its semi-warm contents.

“Home, sweet home! but this is a poor camp I’ve struck,” he muttered aloud, looking round for something to eat, holding his horse by the bridle meanwhile. With a jerk, however, the animal broke away from him; Nigger had nipped its heels, and as the frightened steed ran towards the place where it heard the other horse bells, the air was filled with vehement and eloquent exclamations of: “We won’t go home till morning! Coming thro’ the rye! All people that in Queensland dwell! Onward, Christian soldiers!” A roar of laughter interrupted his poetical flow of language, and he turned angrily and drew a couple of revolvers.

“Come out, ye bush whackers!” he cried. “Come out an’ get shot. Chillagoe Charlie has got the drop on ye——”

“Please don’t shoot,” wailed Dirty Sam in a disguised voice; “we’re only poor prospectors.”

“And we haven’t got any fathers or mothers,” Mike cried.

“Then come out an’ show yourselves, an’ get a feed ready for me. I’m in a hurry an’ I’d just as soon eat a man as anything else when I can’t wait. Chillagoe Charlie must be thousands of miles from here by sunrise.”

"Stop that nonsense, Dave, and put away those revolvers," ordered the parson, stepping up to him. "What do you mean by your conduct?"

"Snakes! an' Britannia rules the waves! boss, is it you?"

"Of course it is, and some of your other comrades too. What are you doing up here, and riding through the night——?" The parson's tones were severe.

"Scots who haven't, boss! Doesn't ye know I am Chillagoe Charlie an' I 'spect there's a couple o' million troopers after me?"

"Poor Psalm-singing Dave has gone mad, boys," cried Mike, honestly believing that his old comrade had become insane.

"By the last rose of summer! I'll make you mad in a second," roared Dave. "No man can give cheek to Chillagoe Charlie an' live——"

"Sit down and we'll have the billy boiling in a minute or two," went on the parson soothingly. "We are all friends here. When did you leave camp?"

"When the circus started. As soon as I saw that the troopers knew Charlie was in our camp I sneaked out and collared the first two horses I could find, and Hungry Ted made up a pack for me and saw me off. Then shouting, 'Those who want Chillagoe Charlie will have to ride to ——' you know the place I mean, boys, its somewhere in North Queensland——'for him,' I cleared, and scooted down the creek and over the Walsh like a willy-willy. I don't know how many troopers came after me, but I didn't care if there were millions and hundreds of them. I turned and shot at a lot of them, and by and by they fell behind and Chillagoe Charlie is himself again. Ain't ye afraid of me, boy?"

"Not a bit, Dave," Tom laughed. "I've met you

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before, you know. Don't you remember we rode together? But I can't recollect the shooting part of the business."

"What have you been reading of late, Dave?" asked the parson, as Mike handed Dave a pannikin of boiling tea.

"I've got it with me," answered Dave, producing an old copy of the *Sydney Bulletin*. "It's a mighty powerful story of how a fellow up in the Gulf country got so ill with everything that he was just about to throw himself down the shaft so as his mates could get the compensation money, when he read somewhere that a box of somebody's red and green pellets, at only half-a-crown a box too, would cure him even although he was so bad that his mates had already cut out his name on a tree——"

"That will do, Dave," interrupted the parson. "We don't want to hear any more about the advertisement you have been reading; who told you you were Chillagoe Charlie?"

"Why, parson, no man told me. Didn't ye guess it all along? I was the foreman of the Caledonia Mines, and the only man who had any time for playing any games. An' didn't I pull the blinkers over your eyes nicely when I pretended I had no eddication, an' was only good-hearted Psalm-singing Dave? But, boys, there's a reward offered for me, an' I don't mind if you get it among you."

"Do you mean to say, Dave, that you are Chillagoe Charlie?" demanded Dirty Sam, not knowing what to think of Dave's statement.

"Of course I is. I won the toss fair an' square, although Hungry Ted didn't seem to think so."

"What are you talking about?" the parson asked sternly. "You must be a fool, Dave——"

"What ! Call Chillagoe Charlie a fool. Parson, if ye wasn't who ye are I'd—I'd, God save the King ! I'd—I'd—— Here, boys, help me. What would I do ?"

"Fight him, maybe," suggested Mike, still in doubt as to how Dave's words should be taken.

"Sing a hymn to him ?" was Sam's comment.

"Tell the whole story, seeing you are among friends," Tom said. He was fast assuming an air of responsibility, and the spirit of self-reliance was strong within him.

"Yes, Dave, out with the yarn and let us get to sleep again," said the parson. "When did you become Chillagoe Charlie ? And what did you mean by saying you won the toss ?"

"Just what I said, parson ; the troopers had gone nap on their man being in our camp, and they had already gone round every man excepting Peter the Poet, Ginger Bob, Hungry Ted, an' myself. Bullocky Bill was the last man suspected, an' after that we knew our turn must come soon, so the rest of us tossed a coin to see who he really was, an' I won. They were to claim the reward when I got clear away, but some fool spoiled our game by a revolver-shot somewhere which made the troopers git up like a cloud of mosquitoes when a new chum comes along, an' I hadn't even time to say goodbye——"

"Well, lie down and sleep now," said the parson. "I will go over and unsaddle your horse. To-morrow we'll decide upon what to do with the notorious Chillagoe Charlie ; meanwhile, you are to us only Psalm-singing Dave." The parson walked over to catch Dave's horses, and Dirty Sam said curiously, "I suppose you know you've been captured, Dave ?"

"What ! It's not true. They never got near me——"

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"I don't know if that alters the fact, Dave. I was referring to the other Chillagoe Charlie. He was collared, despite your escape, at Caledonia Camp, and the news is all over the country."

"Who is he, Sam ; who is he ?"

"Why, I thought you said——?"

"God save the King ! Never mind what you thought I said. Who have they caught ?"

"I don't know. It is some one in the camp, anyhow——"

"Glory Hallelujah ! It must be Peter the Poet. He'll have agreed with Bullocky Bill to share the reward. The—the—Auld Lang Syne, Sam, but it is hard for me to keep from saying what I think."

"I know, Dave; but lie down and get a rest now. Here is the parson coming back."

"I've hobbled both your horses, Dave, and removed the packs. They will lie safely where they are until sunrise. Get to sleep now."

Five minutes after Nigger was again the only guard, but he was a safe one. He showed this by rousing the camp again about half an hour after the men had fallen asleep. He barked viciously, but nothing could be heard by any one, nor were there any signs of visitors.

"You're wrong this time," Nigger," the parson said, after ten minutes' listening.

"I don't think so, sir," said Tom. "I have never known him to make a mistake."

Nor had he that time. At sunrise, when the men went out for the horses, they found several cut hobble straps, but the horses which had worn them had disappeared.

CHAPTER X

THROUGH THE FIERY CIRCLE

“**D**ONE, and as brown as a new chum’s damper,” Dirty Sam exclaimed, “and by niggers too——”

“Yes,” admitted Mike, with a laugh which to Tom seemed incongruous. “The natives have bested us this time. I wonder what their game is?”

“How do you know it was natives who stole the horses?” Tom asked. “Could it not have been——?”

“No, it couldn’t have been any other people,” Mike broke in. “White men would have unbuckled the hobbles rather than cut through those solid leather straps, and Chinese would not have left so much evidence behind. Besides, no people but those with cast-iron soles to their feet would go barefooted over the blistering sand and through that grass which will even pierce leggings. We know the native doesn’t mind these trifles, and look, there are imprints of naked feet——”

“Dry up, Mike,” said Dirty Sam. “We haven’t time to play at being trooper superintendents. We’ve got to get back our horses, without any loss of time.”

“God save the King ! an’ the Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond——”

“Shut up, Dave,” the parson spoke, “and go back and get some breakfast ready. I’ll get the horses.”

"I know I can get my own one," said Mike, "but it beats me to know how you can be so sure of finding any of them. No man could ride mine bare-back——"

"Exactly, Mike. Nor can any man ride mine. I know, therefore, that my horse can't be very far away, and as I have trained it to come at my whistle, I hope by its aid to be able very soon to round up all the others. The natives wouldn't attempt to ride them without saddles or bridles, and I expect they've simply been driven away." He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly, and almost before the echoes died away his own horse, followed by Tom's, came galloping towards him from the other side of a bluff which ran down into the river.

"By Killarney's lakes an' streams, parson, your whistle has brought two of the nags; you might whistle again for mine——"

"Jove! Those two horses must have been mates at one time, parson; it is funny that a horse that belonged to Chillagoe Charlie should hang in so well to your nag." Dirty Sam was slightly amused at the idea; but the parson did not seem to notice his words.

"Come on, Chillagoe," said Mike to Dave; "let us get back and pack up. You don't seem to recognise your own horse, though; how's that?"

"My horses aint there."

"I know that; but the one you—I mean Chillagoe Charlie—gave to Tom is. It has taken a fancy for the parson's——"

"Come along, Tom," the parson broke in. "Saddle up, and we'll go out after the other horses at once. They can't be very far off."

"And I'll go up the river a bit and look for a good

breakfast of duck," said Dirty Sam. "Mike and Chillagoe Charlie can pack up and boil the billy."

Dave gave vent to sundry exclamations; but no one was listening, and when he enlarged further on his grievances to Mike, the latter said, "Well, I can't help Dirty Sam laughing at you. Just imagine Chillagoe Charlie without a horse. Why, Dave, you old fraud, you can't act the rôle of Charlie enough even to scare off some niggers——"

"Mike O'Flannigan, if ye had any sense in that big head of yours ye would have tumbled long ago to the fact that I've a boncer of a scheme. Listen to this——"

The two were now alone, Sam having gone up the river with his gun, and the parson and Tom having just disappeared over a rise in the opposite direction.

"Fire away," said Mike, kindling the fire; "but don't be too long-winded."

"Well, supposing you didn't know me from the Kaiser of Japan an' I held ye up, tellin' ye I was Chillagoe Charlie, what would ye do?"

"Hit out at you and generally smash you up for being such an idiot as to try to make any one, not a new chum magistrate or a trooper superintendent, believe you——"

"Oh, maybe old Psalm-singing Dave would give ye as much as he would get; but never mind that. Supposin' you were the new chum magistrate or J.P., or whatever you calls them?"

"I might tell you to go and get a shave and wear a decent shirt, that your style of get-up was out of date for a modern bushranger, and that your photo would spoil the books that so many people would write about your doings. No, no, Dave; to give the name of Chillagoe Charlie a chance to go down to fame with

that of Dan Kelly and those two brothers in South Queensland who kept the special-duty troopers after them for a couple of years, the owner of it must be good-looking and have black hair. In fact, he must be a man like Mr. Hornsby—without the eyeglass, of course—or the parson. Either of these would do for Charlie; and if Dirty Sam were dressed decently he might also pass, and so would Long Tom of Crocodile Crossing."

"An' so would Mike O'Flannigan, an' Peter the Poet, the trooper superintendent, and the special-duty sergeant," added Dave; "but as all those people have got other things to do, it comes down to poor old Dave to play the game. Now, here is my plan. We'll be within ridin' distance of Laura township when we git up among the Palmer ranges; now, the boss magistrate there can't know what Charlie is like, 'cos no one has ever seen him. Well, you'll tie me up to my horse, an' march me in there with your gun at my head, saying that I tried to hold you up, and that I said I was Chillagoe Charlie. When they ask me, of course I'll swear I am, an' you'll git the reward an' can divide it among the boys——"

"But you, Dave; where do you come in? It might go badly with you?"

"No fear; Mr. Hornsby can say that I've never been away from him for years, when the time comes, and that I've had a touch of the sun afore."

"But the real man may upset your plans by getting caught. In fact, as we told you last night, he is caught now."

"Not much; it has been that silly boss trooper makin' a fool of himself again, or else Hungry Ted or some of the boys trying to git that reward by saying it is Peter the Poet. The troopers themselves know

better, an' Mr. Hornsby will soon put his foot on that, anyhow. No, Mike ; it looks a dead cert that Charlie is one of us fellows, maybe you, for all I know ; but you can bet your whiskers that all the troopers think I'm the man, an' I'll go nap that they're on my trail now."

"But if they've got one Chillagoe Charlie, or think they have, they won't want another ?"

"Just what I am tryin' to pump into ye. The man they have has only to deny everything an' the troopers can do nothing. Then if the report goes round that the man they chased over the Walsh has been captured up north and admits that he is Charlie, they'll have to let the other fellow go."

"But perhaps he is the genuine article ?"

"Well, does that matter ? He can lie low, an' by the time it is found that I am not him either, the troopers will be out of the country an' all the excitement died away."

"But supposing he is not one of our mates, Dave ? Why should you trouble on his behalf ?"

"Mike, ye know as well as I do that the fellow who has the handle of Chillagoe Charlie is one of us. The troopers told me myself that O'Brian an' some o' the other shanty-keepers in Murgooona told the superintendent that they had chased him to our camp often ; an' that fellow Smith that the parson knocked out, an' who caused the strike in the mines, told him that he knew who it was, for he had seen him ride into camp with his mask on at all hours of the night when he was on night duty at the mines. He wouldn't give the name then, however ; of course, he was only bluffin' an' didn't know who it was, although he may have seen him often enough."

"Then who do you think is the man, Dave ?"

"The boss, Mike, or I wouldn't be so mighty anxious to have anything to do with the business."

"I am beat, Dave. Do you know, I came away thinking I could draw the troopers after me, to save Sam, and he left camp for the same reason, only he thought he was doing me a good turn. It seems a hopeless case, Dave, to find out who he really is. Why, he rode up here himself with Tom; so that proves he can't be Mr. Hornsby, if he was there when you left."

"Oh, he was in camp then; I saw him myself, an' he shouted to me to give him my horse. I knew better though, an' I charged through the sleepy troopers as if Jimmy Squarefoot was after me. Now, will ye fall in with my idea? I am Chillagoe Charlie, an' ye can do the rest."

"I don't know, Dave. If I thought it was Mr. Hornsby I would give myself up. A good case could be made out against me, and I would do anything for him. Let's ask the parson's advice."

"Ye Banks and Braes! no. He wouldn't hear of us doing anything, an' would preach to ye for a week about your sins if ye mentioned anything. We can talk the thing over with Dirty Sam the first chance we git."

"Then here he comes now with a lot of ducks and pigeons."

"An' I hear the horses comin', too. Look, there they are, comin' over the rise, with that little dog biting at their heels."

"But where are the others? I don't see the parson nor Tom," Mike cried.

"I saw them," said Dirty Sam, coming up. "They circled round about after something, and crossed the river about a mile above where I was. I expect they lost the horses."

But Sam was hardly correct in his opinion ; they hadn't looked for the horses. They had cut other tracks which at once caused the parson to leap from his horse to examine them. "We'll get the horses later, Tom," he then cried ; "it looks as if we are being surrounded. We'll ride along those tracks for a bit and investigate."

They did not notice that Nigger left them when they turned along the suspicious tracks, and soon their attention was so fully taken up with the signs they saw that they did not even notice they were circling back to the river again, until they suddenly cut their own tracks of the previous day. The parson had long ere this surprised Tom with his wonderful knowledge of bushcraft, and when they struck the river again on the eastern side of their camp he had imparted much information to his companion. They crossed the waterway and rode up and down the opposite bank for a mile each way, but no signs indicating that any people had been on that side could be found.

"Well, Tom, can you read what you have seen ?" the parson asked as they turned to ride back to camp. He was now certainly about the last man whom one would take to be a parson, and Tom could not help comparing him with his companion of his great night ride.

"It seems, sir, that a number of natives came down the river last night, and perceiving the light of our camp fire, made a detour round us. What their intentions were I can't imagine, but I take it that they were driving our horses away when Nigger awoke us the second time."

"You are right so far as you have gone, Tom. I will supplement your information by telling you that

at the present moment a full tribe, or perhaps several tribes, have cut us off from the south. They are now throwing out right and left wings with the intention of surrounding us, as without our horses we can't get north fast enough to get beyond the closing circle. It is probably the people the Bishop told us of who are doing this, and if they have gathered to hold a full corroborree we are intended to play a part in that ceremony with which will finish our interest in North Queensland and all things mundane. I am surprised, I must admit, because hitherto the aborigines have not been troublesome, and they usually sent round and asked prospectors to clear out when they were about to hold an important corroborree."

"Then, sir, it must be as the Bishop said; the Chinese are instigating the affair?"

"I don't see how that can be either, for we are still about a hundred miles from the Chinese workings. We'll get back and warn the others at once, and then track up the horses, if possible. If we get them soon we will make a dash north, but if they have been driven far away we'll just have to build a fort and prepare for certain trouble at the most convenient spot we can find before late in the day. The natives are always maddened with drugs when they are about to celebrate any event, and then they are more savage than any animal."

"There's our camp, sir; and see, our horses are all in. Sam must have found them."

"No, Sam didn't," spoke that gentleman, hearing Tom's words. "The dog rounded them up; their bells were removed, but we have found them—and breakfast is ready."

"Bolt it as fast as you can, then," said the parson, "and let us get over that river and in among the

ranges. We are being cut off by the natives and only the north is open to us."

"But Sing me to Sleep! parson, ye is not goin' to run away from niggers, is ye?"

"You don't want to be a chief mourner in a corroboree, do you, Dave?"

"No; but can't we ride through them; niggers are almost harmless?"

"But their poisoned spears are not, and we don't want to get mixed up in any affair with them in any case. If some of these very good people down in Brisbane heard of it, they would publish to the world how the prospector is murdering natives wherever he goes, and soon the Gulf country—the richest mineral storehouse known on earth—would be almost barred to us, and left entirely in the hands of the filthy yellow-skins."

"Parson," broke in Dirty Sam, "I never saw you excited before. What do we need to care for either niggers or Chinese? We can hold our own, and by to-morrow night we can be among some white men's camps."

"I am afraid we won't find many white prospectors' camps on the Palmer headwaters, Sam. They have nearly all been deserted, and the Chinaman is lord of the ranges."

"But I thought you said that you were going up to visit some camps you knew?"

"I am, a fairly big camp. Do you remember the trip we had together up here?"

"I should think so. We were rushed by the yellow pigtailed and just escaped with our lives. I mean, some of us did, the other poor fellows went under. And yet the stay-at-homes in the big towns on the coast say the prospector is a man who is never happy unless he

is slaughtering natives. What did the Government do over that affair, parson ? ”

“ Nothing ; they were never asked to do anything. The massacre wasn’t exactly so complete as it at first appeared. The men who were cut off from the main party got into the mountains and hid there. I found them afterwards while running down a promising reef ; they were working that reef in a spot absolutely impregnable. It is they I am going to see now. They are all old comrades of yours and Mike’s.”

“ Well, we are ready for the road again, parson,” said Mike, who, with Tom and Dave, had been saddling up. “ I don’t care a cent for all the Chinese that ever came in to Australia by the back door, and if they run against us it will be their own fault.”

“ Chillagoe Charlie told me my uncle was a member of a secret camp, up where we are going,” Tom said to the parson, as they crossed the river at a shallow part. “ Do you think it can be the same camp ? ”

“ I believe it is, Tom ; I only know of one *white* camp, and Tom Willoughby was well known to most of its members at one time.”

“ Isn’t it strange that Chillagoe Charlie should know him—— ? ”

“ Why no, Tom ; Chillagoe Charlie may have been an honest, upright man in all his dealings up here——”

“ And everywhere else, sir, I am sure. Just imagine me riding through the night with such a man, and not knowing his true nature. Why, he even told me, when I met him first, that if I ever wanted money for anything, to write to him at Laura. I like Chillagoe Charlie, sir ; I did from the first.”

“ Can you account for that feeling, Tom ? ”

“ Yes ; I was firmly persuaded that night when Mr.

Hornsby sent me to meet him, and he was too, I know, that you were he, and I felt no fear whatever."

"And what made you change your mind, Tom?" Dirty Sam, Mike, and Dave had dropped behind and were talking excitedly among themselves.

"I don't know, sir, I just saw it couldn't be. He always kept his face in the shadow, I noticed, however, and I knew his voice was disguised, and from these facts I concluded that he thought I might know him."

"Then who do you think he is now, Tom?"

"I have no idea, sir. I thought, with the superintendent, that he was Mr. Hornsby, then Dirty Sam, Long Tom, Mike, and after that I began to think that he might be the superintendent himself. Of course, I know he isn't Dave."

"No, he isn't Dave, that is certain, although what idea is in the back of Dave's head when he says he is the man, I don't know. It will all be cleared up very soon, however, I feel sure. I think you told me that Charlie told you he would not likely appear again?"

"Yes, he said that when he left me; but I don't remember having told you."

"Ah, well, it doesn't matter. Our own troubles will be quite sufficient very soon without us taking on his worries—that is, if he does worry over anything, which I very much doubt."

"How about crossing this range higher up, parson?" cried Dirty Sam, from the rear. "We may get a lower pass up the river, and an easier road down to the Palmer."

"You are right, Sam," the parson responded. "All the headwaters of the Walsh, Mitchell, and Palmer rise in those eastern ranges and possibly we may strike a Palmer tributary as soon as we get over this divide."

They altered their course, and turned more eastward,

soon getting into a change of country through which travelling was not so arduous, although more broken up by volcanic agencies. All forenoon they journeyed on, halting for lunch underneath a huge ironstone blow that reared itself over two hundred feet above their heads. This gigantic formation at once took up Tom's attention, and while the others prepared the meal he broke off pieces here and there and examined them carefully.

"Well, lad," said Dirty Sam, when the billy was boiling, "have you made any discoveries?"

"I don't know whether it is a discovery or not," replied Tom, "but this formation carries over three per cent. of copper and more silver than I can determine without a careful assay."

"Is there more than twenty ounces to the ton, Tom?" asked Mike. "If there is it is worth something."

"Oh yes; I am certain that the silver contents are at least forty ounces to the ton, and I can see that there are two or three pennyweights of gold in the stuff also——"

"Which makes that blow worth a little fortune," commented the parson. "Calculate copper at the present market price of £70 per ton, and the silver at half-a-crown an ounce. Then, say, three dwts. of gold at £4 per ounce, and what have we got?"

"About £7 10s. a ton," said Dirty Sam; "and I reckon this blow is 200 feet high, about 600 feet long, and, say, an average width of 50 feet. There is a ton to every 12½ feet of the stuff, and a ton is worth £7 10s. The whole blow must be worth——?"

"Two hundred multiplied by six hundred multiplied by fifty equals six millions," Tom figured rapidly to himself. "Divide that by twelve and a half to get the

tonnage and we have four hundred and eighty thousand tons of ore in sight, which, at the value of £7 10s. a ton, means that what we can see of that blow is worth three millions six hundred thousand pounds."

"Which you may safely multiply again by three," said the parson; "it is bound to extend into the ground as a fissure lode, so your blow is worth at least ten millions, Tom."

"But we won't take it with us just now," laughed Mike.

"By the side of the cider-tree I but eddication is a great thing," Dave muttered; "I suppose we have all shares in this gold mine?"

"Of course, Dave," said Mike; "we'll all share alike——"

"Then you couldn't see your way to give me a five-pound note for mine, I suppose?" continued Dave insinuatingly; "I aint no scholar, but I reckon that by the time you get up a smelter, an' build a railway to the coast, an' pay men wages to blow the stuff out, there won't be much more than a fiver for me—that is, if I aint turned into a chunk of copper carbonate myself by that time."

"In any case five pounds is too much to ask, Dave," the parson said; "if a fifth share in this blow was worth five pounds before any work was done, then some of the outcrops I have seen over the next divide must be worth over a million to look at, for there are some three miles in length and all rich in gold——"

"But as we are not going to sell this blow to a syndicate, nor float a company to work it ourselves," said Dirty Sam, "we'd better hurry up with our tucker and get on the move again. Like enough the niggers are moving fast enough now to cut us off before we strike the next water."

Sam's words were in agreement with the opinions of all, and shortly after they were once more threading their way through the scrub and outflung boulders. Before sundown they had passed many most promising outcrops which Tom at once saw were highly mineralised, but they did not stay to examine them, and finally camped by a water-hole in a small creek which they knew led to the Palmer. Strangely enough, they were not tired that night, and for a long time they sat round the fire and talked about anything and everything, Chillagoe Charlie coming in for more than a fair share of the conversation.

The Southern Cross was high in the heavens when they stretched themselves out round the fire and went to sleep, again leaving Nigger sole guard of the camp. But he did not sleep, and about midnight Tom was roused by the dog pulling at his shirt-sleeves.

"What is it, Nigger?" he said, sitting up; "you should let me sleep some time, you know. I have to keep up with the others during the day——"

Nigger's low growl interrupted him and told him that it was no false alarm, and while he sat and vainly tried to find a cause for his dog's conduct, the parson awoke, and then Dirty Sam and Mike, and finally Dave. They all sat up and gazed into the night.

"What is it?" at length Mike asked; "I cannot see nor hear anything."

"Nor I," said Dirty Sam; "except that I never noticed those stars in the north before; they are very low down on the horizon——"

"Those are not stars," the parson remarked quietly; "those lights are torches in the hands of the natives, and we are surrounded. We are in for a corroborree after all. Smother that fire, Dave, and pack up our belongings quietly, and quickly."

"What is the idea, parson?" Sam asked; "hadn't we better just sit tight where we are?"

"Or go round by the back of this ridge behind us and cheat them that way?" suggested Mike.

"That wouldn't cheat them, Mike; they've formed a circle around us; even now those who have been following us all day are close behind us with their flanks thrown round that ridge. Another large body evidently has been camped up here, or else has been moving in front of us all day so as to join with those behind in cornering us at night. We are the centre of their great circle, and we'll know all about their intentions presently."

"Couldn't we charge through them?" Tom suggested; "if they have formed a circle round us of such a size—it must be a mile in diameter—the men forming it cannot be very close to each other and would probably miss us with their spears."

"An' by the howlin'—I mean, parson, Kick me to sleep!——"

"Sing me to sleep, Dave," corrected Mike.

"You've got mighty particular about a word, my man, but I expect you'll most likely be sent to sleep with a spear. Look up there——"

The men turned their gaze to the top of the ridge which lay behind them. A moment before the summit was lost in the darkness, but now innumerable points of twinkling lights showed it up against the skyline right along its entire length.

"Cycling cyclones!" ejaculated Sam; "we are in for it this time and no mistake. Every nigger in the country must be taking part in this performance. Look down by the flats too. I see the torches closing in through the trees."

"And up the creek too," cried Tom; "we are completely surrounded."

"There is something in all this that I can't understand," the parson muttered as the horses were saddled; "I did not know there were so many aborigines in these parts, and even then I know all the chiefs personally."

"Oh, the Chinkies are at the bottom of it all," said Sam; "the Bishop spoke the truth. They will be corroborree mad too, and mean to do their ghost-dancing business round us." Sam examined his revolvers, and the others did likewise.

"If we are all ready, boys, here is my plan," said the parson, who strangely enough seemed to take command, and be allowed to do so, as a matter of course; "let us lead our horses into the sandy bed of the creek and move towards the advancing line of lights as quickly and as silently as possible. We must go fast, because as that circle converges the natives come closer together——"

"We understand," spoke Mike and Sam; "we are to get close up and then break through at their weakest point——?"

"Hardly, boys. That would have been the plan if we knew we were dealing only with poorly armed aborigines. This time, I fear, we have more cunning brains to deal with, and most probably there are some rifles among the party. No, we can't risk getting a bullet through us, even although it may be of Chinese manufacture; we'll try strategy, and the first thing is to get away from the deadly centre of this human ring."

"All right, parson," spoke Sam; "give your orders."

"Then some of you get away up the creek bed with the horses, place the bells on their necks, as you go, but tie up the clapper. When you get near the ring set the clappers free and hide among the animals as

best you can. The natives will probably not be walking in the creek itself, and on hearing the bells will think it is our horses feeding along the banks. They'll not likely notice the animals are saddled, and that some have got packs, and in their hurry to get their supposed sleeping victims will not trouble about them, knowing they can catch them later if they want them. When you get through the ring wait on Tom and me, if we haven't joined you before. Now get away."

"But Hallelujah ! parson. What are you an' Tom goin' to do ?"

"Make some dummy figures and kindle up our fire again. We'll come after you in no time."

"But these beggars coming down the slope may rush you at any moment," said Sam ; "shouldn't we better stick to each other while we can ?"

"The natives are too fond of a theatrical display to rush the fire before the ring has contracted so that all may take part in the last part of the game. Go away now, or everything will be spoiled."

Without a word Sam, Mike, and Dave led the horses into the dry sandy creek, and Tom, under the parson's advice, threw some light timber on to the fire and fanned it into a blaze. The parson himself meanwhile was placing some logs in position round the fire so that at a distance of a few yards they might look like sleeping men. But their work took some time, and when all was ready the lights coming down the hill were almost upon them, while the great circle itself had contracted to a much smaller size than it was when they had last seen it."

"Now Tom, run for it," whispered the parson ; "Nigger is with us."

"He can look after himself easily," replied Tom,

springing into the darkness with the parson ; " I hear the horses' bells ringing now, the boys must be nearly through the lines."

" Listen for yells, then ; if you don't hear an uproar in a minute they will have got through undetected."

They ran on, keeping on the hard bank of the creek so as to make the best progress possible until nearer the fiery line. Suddenly the parson stopped. " The boys are through," he gasped breathlessly ; " but the natives are now crowded into the creek too. Climb up this tree, Tom, and don't make a sound."

" But you, sir, what are you going to do—— ?"

" I am going to follow you, of course. Up you get and crawl out on that overhanging branch. Nigger, run away and look after yourself."

Tom easily climbed the tree and pulled himself out among the branches, and immediately behind him the parson followed. And they were none too soon, for now the line of torches were close upon them. The parson drew both his revolvers and smiled grimly, and Tom thought that if it came to the bit he could do some shooting himself, for his weapons were also ready and he knew how to use them.

" I hope Nigger is not sitting at the foot of the tree," he whispered to the parson.

" Not he ; the dog knows we are hiding, and is probably trying to create a diversion for our benefit in a way that appeals to a dog's mind. Listen !" The line of natives were now only a few yards off, and their faces were now plainly discernible in the flickering torch-light. There seemed to be hundreds of them, all naked, and all painted fantastically to represent skeletons. That they were under the influence of the great drug pidcherie was at once apparent, and the smell of the rancid fat, or other

preparation with which their bodies were smeared, almost took Tom's breath away.

"Yumburu white fellow kurdigurdu kummung-gurra," one big native with a heavy brass chain round his neck said to these nearest him. "King Billy nur-runggyunya, buriri kanggul white fellow——"

"White fellow burliddyera kirri bumbo buriri," laughed another, and the men in the tree-top held their breath. The natives were passing under.

"The first speaker is a chief supposed to be civilised," the parson muttered, "yet his words mean that 'the sleeping white fellows will be ghosts before they know what killed them.' And the other native said in effect, 'Won't the white fellows jump about when their heads are chopped off?'"

"They are standing underneath our tree," whispered Tom. "They must have seen us."

"No, they are awaiting the signal to rush the old camp. And, Tom, the language of those two who spoke shows that they are southern natives. This must be a general rising. Ah! poor Nigger; that's his bark, and it will be all over with him."

"I see him!" cried Tom excitedly, forgetting where he was. "That hideously painted man on the opposite side of the creek has caught him. I'll shoot him——"

"No you won't, Tom. It is Nigger who has caught him. Listen to his yells."

And such was the case. Nigger, doubtless reasoning in his own way, having concluded that his presence was hurtful to his master, and that he had to get through the line of torch-bearing humanity on his own account, had crossed the creek and deliberately attacked the man whom he thought would be most susceptible to dog bites. He had made no mistake, and



"HE WAS CAUGHT BY THE THROAT FROM BEHIND AND THROWN
HEAVILY TO THE GROUND."

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in response to the yells of the man the flaming cordon broke and ran to his assistance, and Nigger, barking joyfully, ran over the creek again, safely through.

"Quick, Tom, now is our chance," the parson cried. "Let us get down and run for it. They'll never notice us in the confusion ; they'll think we're part of themselves——"

Before he had finished speaking both were on the ground and running up the creek, among the other warriors who were chasing Nigger. Only one man had remained on the same side as they had taken refuge on, near enough to take part in the chase. The rest were running up the opposite bank, not knowing that the black little "Nigger" had recrossed the creek. But the one man had observed the dog's little scheme, and he was hard upon the unsuspecting dog, who was now wondering where his master was. An instant more and the warrior would have pounced upon Nigger, but before that instant had transpired he was caught by the throat from behind and thrown heavily to the ground.

"Keep going, Tom," the parson cried, springing to his feet after examining the man he had half killed. "I know all about this business now. That man is a Chinaman disguised as a native——"

"Run, Nigger," Tom cried, "and don't bark."

And run they did, until suddenly a voice beside them spoke. "A starry night for a ramble, boys, but it's them," it said. "Hallelujah !"

"We thought it was all up with you, mates," Dirty Sam said, jumping up from the long grass beside them, "and were just about to go back to share the funeral with you."

"There goes the signal for the rush now," cried Mike. "Look at the beggars."

A ghingi-ghingi¹ had suddenly wailed out a blood-curdling note, and in response the line of torches formed up again and closed swiftly in on the blazing camp fire. Another wail broke on the sultry night air, and then, with shrieks and yells, the mob broke and rushed headlong on the supposed sleeping camp.

For a minute the white men listened to the "ping" of the long spears as they broke off in the dummy forms, for another half-minute they laughed over the frenzied yells of the warriors, and then they sprang into their saddles and galloped off, the parson taking Nigger up beside him as Chillagoe Charlie had done.

¹ A fluted piece of wood which, when swung round the head, gives out a weird, wailing sound.

CHAPTER XI

THE CITY WITHOUT A NAME

"SOME people say that the Australian interior is monotonous," remarked Dirty Sam, as they clattered through a patch of big detached boulders shed from a reef near. "But what with aborigines, Chinese, Chillagoe Charlies, troopers, and secret cities, I think the old Austral land can hold its own, in the way of providing excitement, with any other country."

"You've forgotten the bunyip, and the corroborree, and such remarkable creatures as the Brisbane spider, and the red-cross ant," said the parson.

"Down among the red men!" cried Dave, "but I reckon the excitement of a good sleep would do none of us no harm, an' the next time I has to get up an' clear out in the middle of the night I just reckon I'll lie where I am an' chance bein' speared."

"I think all danger of that is past for a time," the parson said. "We have left all the natives to the south, and it is not likely that they will come north again. But by daylight we should be among the headwaters of the Palmer River, and our troubles after that will be chiefly with Chinamen——"

"I suppose we'll start prospecting to-morrow in earnest?" asked Mike. "We are going through likely

country now, for I can see big blows of copper or something else everywhere around."

"I think we should camp to-morrow and rest," the parson suggested. "Our horses will be useless if we don't give them a spell."

"We should be pretty near that place where we were cut up before, by sunrise, parson," ventured Sam. "I vote we should camp as you say, and see if we can pick up that funny black stuff again; I know Tom is eager to assay it."

"We'll have to camp for a time anyway," said the parson, "unless we want to ride into a Chinese camp. We are near one now, I know, but I can't tell where it lies until I can see our surroundings."

"If you fellows wouldn't talk so loud I could get a sleep on my horse," sang out Dave. "What do we need to care for some Chinkies anyhow?"

"We don't care for them, Dave," Sam answered. "That is just the trouble. They may not heed the fact that we do not care for their society—— Hallo! My horse was nearly down that time——"

"We've got into some bad country, boys," cried Mike, peering ahead anxiously. "The ground seems all broken up like an abandoned mining camp. By Jupiter! there are holes big enough——"

"Stop, boys," suddenly cried the parson, "I know where we are now. We can't go any farther in the dark. Get off and lead your horses after me, and keep an eye on the pack ones too. We're within a mile of a Chinese camp."

"From Greenland's icy fountains!" exclaimed Dave. "I was nearly not needin' any tucker to-morrow just now." He dismounted at the edge of a deep cutting and went over every song and hymn he could call to mind with a fervency which denoted much feeling.

But the parson was now leading his horse up a hill, and, falling into line behind, the others followed carefully. For about an hour they struggled upwards among the mullock heaps of the old workings, but finally the parson stopped and said, "We're all right now, boys, and had better camp here until sunrise whether we intend remaining afterwards or not. Don't let the horses go until morning."

Ten minutes later the men were asleep, their horses, tired and dejected-looking, standing near them. It was just on sunrise when Tom opened his eyes, and he turned to his comrades with an exclamation of wonder. But some one was missing; he saw only three men lying beside him—Dirty Sam, Mike, and Dave. Why! where was the parson? He sprang to his feet and gazed around, but the parson was not in sight. At that moment Sam awoke, and stared down at the scene which had occasioned Tom's surprise. He was looking at a settlement or township which certainly was not Australian in style. On the plains beyond the abandoned workings into which they had stumbled a few hours before was a collection of galvanised-iron and bark erections, but all fancifully adorned with crude Chinese symbols. No signs of life were visible, but it was only six o'clock, and probably the inhabitants were still asleep.

"Well, if I weren't well used to the speed at which the yellow beggars can work when they want, I would think I was dreaming just now," Sam muttered; "for I'm open to bet every cent I possess that that place wasn't there the last time I was up this way." He turned and saw Tom. "Good morning," he said. "What is the matter with you? You seem as though the prospect of exploring China in the heart of Australia held no attractions for you."

"Where is the parson?" was all Tom could answer, and, jumping up, Sam saw the reason for Tom's words.

"Gone out to see if he can shoot anything, I suppose," said Sam. "Our larder is not too well stocked."

"But there is his horse," exclaimed Tom. "He would have taken it if he had been going out to shoot, and here is his rifle too, and he has no gun——?"

"Whew! that looks strange. But what are we thinking about? The parson will have gone up the hill a bit to take his bearings. He will have been as much surprised as I was to see that settlement down there. We'll get breakfast ready and await developments."

Which was a very wise proceeding, as during the preparations, and just as Mike and Dave arose and shook themselves, the parson suddenly appeared in camp with his hat full of eggs and his pockets filled with bacon.

"Jeremiah, Jonah, an' Julius Cæsar!" Dave exclaimed; "where did you shoot that stuff?"

"These are hens' eggs," cried Tom. "How did you come to find them?"

"I found them, nevertheless, and with this bacon they will provide a very good breakfast. Have you ever seen a Chinese town before, Tom?"

"Only the Chinese quarters in Sydney, sir."

"Then after breakfast we'll explore this one on the flats beneath us."

"I thought," said Sam tentatively, "that our first order would be to saddle up and get over the divide? But, of course, I don't mind paying the beggars a friendly call, seeing we are passing this way; all the same——" Sam looked at his revolvers significantly.

"Sam, Sam," spoke the parson reprovingly, "why are you always a man of war? I am sure you know that our yellow brethren are the most peace-loving people on earth, and that we are quite safe in visiting them?"

"That depends on whether they're sleeping or not when we call," laughed Sam.

"And on whether the population have paid their poll-taxes or not, I should think," Mike added.

"But, God Save the King! boys, ain't we in Ostralya yet? Can't a white man do what he likes in this country so long as he doesn't break no laws?"

"He can, if he is strong enough; but up here the yellowman holds most power," answered the parson; "still, the law of the land is behind us——"

"Yes, but over a hundred miles too far behind," Sam said gloomily. "The full strength of the law is chasing shadows and killing good horses down near Murgoona. If the troopers would come up here and either wipe out the murderous yellow vermin or keep them in their proper place, instead of hunting for Chillagoe Charlie, honest prospectors might have a chance——"

"Well, breakfast is ready," Mike said, "and I for one won't ask where the parson got it."

"He got it from his friends the Chinese, of course," Sam said, with a laugh. "You can't go out and shoot bacon ready cured like this in the heart of the Peninsula."

"Which shows that the Chinese must be friendly disposed," Tom put in, "otherwise how could the parson get the fresh eggs and bacon from them?"

"Oh, he might have threatened to preach to them if they didn't give freely," said Sam; "Chinese will do anything to get rid of parsons."

"In which case, Sam, they would have poisoned the food," the parson suggested.

"Jumping Jackeroos!" roared Sam, springing to his feet, and spitting out a mouthful of bacon; "I never thought of that, and that is a famous old game of theirs."

"You've got mighty particular all of a sudden, Sam," commented Mike, lifting another piece of bacon from the ashes; "I reckon the parson knows better than to take with thanks what the Chinkies give."

Dave and Nigger did not seem to care whether their breakfasts were poisoned or not. Dave was lifting eggs from the billy and eating them with a dexterity found only among sons of the bush, who frequently have neither knife nor spoon to assist them in their gastronomical performances, and Nigger ran round all, receiving something from each in turn. Tom was paying great attention to the parson's words. He noted a new expression on his face, and wondered what it meant.

"You may go ahead safely, Sam," the parson said quietly; "your food is not poisoned, nor did Chinese hands touch it."

"Then where did you get it?" Sam asked, greatly puzzled.

"Sam, you first-class gold medal idiot, sit down and plug ahead," roared Mike. "The parson is running this show just now, and what he doesn't want to tell us is none of our business. Dave, go slow a bit and let Tom and Sam get a chance."

"Men, I have some startling information to give you, but you must be content to wait some time before I can impart it; it is not altogether in my power to say anything yet, but, briefly, there's a camp of white men not far off and they are working a

wonderfully rich deposit of alluvial gold. When we have finished breakfast I want to go round and inspect that Chinese settlement down there, after which we will ride on a bit, or let our horses go, as seems best to us all."

"There is a happy land, parson," spoke Dave, looking up for the first time since they started breakfast. "We will help you to haul down the joss when we find his house, and while you are leaving tracts I'll break him up for ye with a couple o' plugs o' gelignite. We'll make the beggars good Christians if we've got to use all the dynamite we have——"

"No, we won't, Dave ; and you'll leave their joss alone. I am not up here on a mission to the Chinese, I prefer to confine my work to the white heathen like you——"

"An' Mike an' Tom an' Nigger an' Sam," said Dave, who understood the parson well. "But ye banks an' five-pound notes ! Wouldn't it be great if ye could get a pair o' hobbles round Chillagoe Charlie's feet an' make him listen to ye. I reckon ye could do good business with him, an' we would all help to hold him while you punched it into him——"

The parson did not answer ; he didn't appear to have been listening to Dave ; and soon after the men were ready for their tour of exploration in the Chinese city. Nigger, of course, was also ready. They led the horses into a gully which split the main range near where they had camped, and hobbled them closely, so that they could not go far away, and then began to pick a way down through the old mullock dumps, open cuts, and pot-holes towards the settlement. As yet there had been no signs of life in the place, although they had watched for the rising smoke

which would indicate the preparation of breakfast in some house.

"They must be a very lazy set of people," said Dirty Sam, as they came near the first house, a white painted galvanised iron structure, with yellow stripes bordering the top, and a flat roof; "I should have thought that not even a nigger could be in bed in this terrific heat."

"Yet the Chinese are not lazy, Sam," the parson said; "they are always up with the sun. Ah! that is a store. Look at the wonderful inscription above the door."

They came to a halt in front of the first building. It had no windows, in the real sense of the word, and looked more like a block-house than anything else. Large squares had been cut out of the metal sides, however, and the pieces thus removed had been hinged back into position over the holes in a way that allowed them to be opened to any extent, according to the angle of the sun's rays. An inscription in Chinese characters was artistically painted above the door, and the owner's name, "Quong Tart," was scrawled in English letters underneath, with the additional information that the proprietor was a "general storekeeper." But the place was quiet and the flaps all down, and the party walked on to the next house. It also was a store, but more pretentious than the first in appearance, although it had flaps instead of windows like the others. All along the top of the walls, on a flaring yellow surface, were painted a series of inscriptions, which the parson said were advertising the fact that the owner had his own tea estate in Formosa, from which he received regular shipments.

"They pay no duty," I'll bet," commented Mike; "but what on earth is this place?"

He stood in front of a long erection, of which canvas sacking and bamboo seemed to form the walls. These were in sections that could roll up like venetian blinds, and a cleverly-painted dragon worked its sinuous length from end to end of the movable side. There was no inscription here, but a carved piece of wood, embellished by paper ornamentations to illustrate a "wheel of fortune," showed that this was a gaming saloon, in which weird and wonderful games of chance were played for stakes ranging from a sixpence up to perhaps a hundred ounces of gold.

"This place is evidently a well-known settlement," the parson said. "The presence of this saloon proves that there are many white men who come here to gamble regularly, for the happy Celestials are too cunning to play the games that go on in here among themselves. We'll have a look inside later——"

"Here is a place called 'A Cigar Divan,'" cried Tom.

"Another proof of the white man's presence," laughed Dirty Sam. "Pass on, Tom."

"Then what is this?" cried Tom, running up some wooden steps that led to a verandah, on which stood the most imposing erection in the township.

"The joss house!" yelled Dave in delight. "See if the joss is at home."

The men joined Tom in a moment, and paused before a heavily curtained doorway. This building was entirely of cedar-wood, and every part of it was carved and painted exquisitely to represent flowers, dragons, and other fanciful figures dear to the Celestial mind.

"Ah!" said the parson, "the joss will tell us something, I feel sure."

He fumbled among the curtains, and a central part

rolled up disclosing a hideous carved and painted idol, on whom gold ornamentations had been freely lavished. But his body was covered with pins. The joss was, apparently, the sole occupant of the room, but there were a number of curtained recesses in the stuffy apartment behind him that doubtless contained secondary josses, or those used for special purposes.

"I know everything now, boys," said the parson, after a brief investigation. "Come and see if we can awake any of the population. Let us try that store across the road."

"Ah Sing!" shouted Mike a moment later, rattling the flaps of an erection which described itself in English as a tea, coffee, and tobacco store, "wake up and attend to us."

But Ah Sing did not answer, nor did any one, although they tried every prominent house in the city.

"The place must be abandoned," hazarded Sam at length. "A plague must have struck it. And by Jupiter! there is enough gold about that pin-stuck joss to make a fortune."

"Yes, the place is abandoned," agreed the parson, "but only for a few hours. We'll have them all at home very soon now, and then the trouble will start. There are no people here just now, because they are all out hunting us disguised as aborigines."

"Great—I mean—oh! why isn't Peter the Poet here to help me? I don't know another—— Ah! we'll soon be dead, parson; but you are a boncer for finding out things. How do you know?"

"I guessed it from the first, and I have been making sure all morning. Do you think I would have asked you to come to a notorious Chinese den had I not suspected that we would find its empty of its inhabitants? But where is Tom?"

"He went round to the back of that house a minute ago," said Mike. "But tell us what you know, parson. We're not used to dealing at close quarters with the yellow beggars."

"I remember the only dealings I had with them," put in Sam; "I thought they would be like the crowd one meets in Little Burke Street, Melbourne, or maybe like the Charters Towers, or Cairns mob, and that a man could handle a dozen of them himself. But centipedes! it is a different animal altogether that swarms over the Gulf country, and they were too much for us."

"I remember some of the stories of the early days on the Palmer," said Dave reminiscently.

He would probably have gone on to repeat them, but Mike suddenly said, "Why, that must be the Palmer River in that flat over on our right? It was just about here that a party I was with some years ago got into trouble with the yellowmen."

"And what did you do, Mike?" asked Dave. "Clear out?"

"Yes; but we came back again made up as niggers. But you know the story, boys; I've often told it round the fire at Caledonia Camp. We had struck a rich patch of gold, and we worked it out, naked and painted as aborigines. There must have been other big deposits near, for there were hundreds of Chinese working all round about, although we could never find out where they were camped, but they never troubled us. We held some fearful and wonderful corroborrees at times when we suspected we were being watched, and if the Chinese found us out they didn't show it."

"Did you find any traces of other deposits, Mike?" the parson asked.

"Only that heavy black stuff which broke the hearts of so many of our best prospectors. We couldn't make out what it was, but we knew that it always led us on to gold."

"And how came you to leave the place, Mike?" Again it was the parson who asked the question. They were wandering round the place, stopping here and there to lift any unfastened window-shutter which allowed them to look into the interior. In most cases, however, the rooms were quite dark, and as the parson wouldn't hear of Sam's going inside with a light, they saw nothing.

"Well," said Mike hesitatingly, "at that time I thought I had a little girl waiting for me down Sydney side, and having made a fair amount of gold, I went down to see her. To cut the story short, boys—for it can't have any interest for you—she had either died or forgotten me and gone away somewhere. Anyway, I could find no trace of her. I knew she had a brother up in the Gulf country, and on the off-chance of falling in with him I came back again. I lost all my money in a silver mine I took up down near Crinkle Creek, and then Mr. Hornsby came along and offered me work with him. I have been with him ever since; and now, boys, you know all the story I've got."

"Except your name," said Sam eagerly. "It isn't Mike O'Flannigan?"

"No; I gave Mr. Hornsby the first name that came into my head. But, excuse me, boys, I'd rather not give my real name. I want to cut my past entirely, with all its memories."

"But you can't, Mike," spoke the parson. "The past will come up in spite of yourself. I, too, can tell a story, but we'll reserve that just now——"

"The initials of your name wasn't by any chance the same as those of the one you adopted, Mike?" Dirty Sam was evidently exercising all his will-power to subdue some excitement.

"My real initials are the same—M, O, F," answered Mike. "What made you think so?"

"Your story, old fellow," cried Sam, grasping Mike's hand, and showing more emotion than any one would have expected from such a reckless, dare-devil character as he was. "Your little girl heard you had been killed in a fight with the blacks, and nearly lost her reason over it. Her people, hoping that the study of music—of which, as you know, she was passionately fond—would divert her mind, took her home to the Old Country. There her voice was made the most of, and it speedily attracted attention. Now I believe all London is at her feet——"

"But you!" gasped Mike. "Who are you?" He looked searchingly into Sam's face, a sudden fear overmastering his other feelings for the moment.

"Oh, I am just Dirty Sam; but I happen to be her brother."

"And she is alive and well?" Mike's face lit up with an expression that changed his cold, rugged, and tanned countenance almost beyond recognition.

"She is."

"God save the King! an' We won't go home till mornin'! an' Auld Lang Syne! an'—an' *darn it!* Parson, I can't help it; it had to come out. Can I not get somebody to find me? Ah, here's Tom! Tom, ye inconsiderate youngster, can't ye see in me a long-lost uncle or aunt or something?" Dave was certainly excited too, and he pranced about in great style.

Tom did not understand him—indeed, he did not

hear his words; but the parson turned his head away for a moment as the boy and his faithful dog approached, running.

"We've found the Chinese," Tom cried, "and we'd better get away at once unless we mean to fight. Nigger led me to them in that big building at the end of the road. Why, what is the matter?"

He paused, and looked at the faces of his comrades in surprise.

"Mike and Sam have just discovered each other," the parson said. "This world is very small, after all. So small, Tom, that I feel certain you will find your uncle before you are much older. But let us get back. Mike, allow me to say how glad I am that you have now the unspeakable joy of hope. I have known who you were for some considerable time; in fact—but no, I must not speak yet. Sam, you never told me you had a sister. Oh, I know who you are, too! I read the papers when I have an opportunity, and I know who the lady is who is at present captivating all London. But even although we have only become acquainted with each other in the midst of a Chinese settlement in the heart of the Gulf country, the past has not been wasted. It was a period in which we were all trained to the uses of adversity, and in which each man found in his comrade the highest attribute that the Almighty allows to humanity."

"But what are we to do, sir?" cried Tom, who did not understand what had transpired while he and Nigger had been exploring the village.

"Hang the Chinese!" growled Dirty Sam. "We'll tie their pigtails together and——"

"Sam!" spoke the parson reprovingly.

"Oh, I forgot you were a parson, and not a fighting-

man," Sam said. "But Mike and I will tackle them ourselves. We don't care for Chinkies now, Mike, do we?"

"Not much, Sam; but neither does the parson. I know him now too. He had a big black beard, the same as I had, when we were together before, and I have seen him fight like ten men."

"Howlin'—— I mean the green grass grew all round! What all-fired idiot said the parson couldn't fight?" cried Dave. "Look at me. Here I am, just burstin' to get in a word to express what I think an'— Glory Hallelujah! I daren't, 'cos the parson bested me in a stand-up affair which ye all seem to have forgotten——"

"We'll likely have all the fighting the most pugnacious of us will want presently. Here come the Chinese," the parson remarked quietly. "Now, boys, be advised by me, and don't start the quarrel, whatever you do. Remember, I know these people, and a good lot more than they dream any one knows."

"You are the boss, parson," spoke Sam, "and I apologise if I said anything out of place to you. Jupiter! Where are the pigtails coming from?"

"From that big shanty at the far end," answered Tom. "Nigger and I watched them coming out of the ground into it."

"Out of the ground into it, Tom?" asked the parson.

"Yes, sir; they seemed to come out of a cellar or some place underneath the floor."

"Ah, I understand. I know the whole story now, boys, and will explain afterwards. Now for a deal with the most cunning people in the world."

The Chinese had now come up. There were about a dozen of them, and they seemed very much surprised at seeing their visitors.

"Goo' moln. Wha' fo' you come hele?" spoke one in not unfriendly tones.

"We are prospectors," answered the parson, "and thought we might be able to purchase some stores from you. What town is this?"

"Town no' got any name yet. We build it hele to tlade with white plospectols. Come along a me, an' see what you want to buy."

"There's some game on already," Sam whispered to Tom, as the party followed the Chinese to one of the stores. "If they were honest traders they would already be fighting among themselves for our custom instead of allowing one to get all the plunder."

"You likee gamee pokel?" suddenly asked one of the Celestials, as they passed the gambling saloon. "We likee do something to killee time." He spoke to Sam.

"We'll see about that game of poker afterwards," Sam answered evasively. "Is time all you kill in this town without a name?" He laughed as he spoke, and the Chinaman grinned also.

"Oh, we sometime killee men too," he said. "We wolk mine an' when plospectol come along an' sticky nose in whele no' wanted we sticky knife into him. He no likee that, he keepy away, allee samee us."

"I suppose you intend to sticky knife into us when you get the chance?" said Mike, accepting a cigarette from the talkative man.

"Hope no; you plenty money, me lathel play you fol it——" Here the Chinaman who had first spoken called out something in Chinese and the man became silent, and would only grin in answer to any further efforts made to induce him to talk.

But the parson and the leader conversed all the

time, and soon they reached the largest store, which, after unlocking an ingenious system of bars, they entered. The flaps were then opened and light and air streamed in to the strange apartment. It had a wooden floor, which fact occasioned much surprise among the visitors, a floor made of ant beds being that most commonly used in the Gulf country interior, and which is also preferable, being vermin proof and cool. There was no counter in the shop, but round the edge of the flooring and on a shelf which ran round three sides were ranged curiously embellished boxes of tea, hideous masks of unique construction, boxes of cigarettes, piles of packs of playing-cards, dice-boxes, lanterns, cases of tinned jam and fruit which Tom noted bore a Singapore label, several bottles of "pain killer," and some cases of a celebrated English sauce. Some dozens of jars of various sizes also found a place, and a brief inspection told Tom that they purported to contain a certain liquid shipped direct from Scotland *via* Singapore. Tom walked around greatly interested in the many Chinese idols and masks, and while he was standing behind a huge hollow joss, entrance into which was hidden only by a curtain, he heard his comrades and the Chinese laughing together at some joke as if they were the greatest of friends.

"The parson must have been mistaken in these people after all," he muttered to himself, pulling aside the curtain and stepping inside the great disused god, "They seem very simple-minded and not all so blood-thirsty as I understood they were——"

At that moment a shout from Sam made him look through the holes serving as eyes in the joss's head, and he saw a sight that for the time paralysed him. The floor had parted in two and his comrades were

falling into a dark abyss which yawned beneath. All the Chinamen were standing close into the wall and laughing with childish delight at their victims. While Tom watched some of them pulled a rope and the floor came back into place again, and the Chinese came out and performed a weird dance over it. Tom's mind became absolutely blank for a moment, then in a tempestuous flood everything rushed upon him. His comrades had been murdered before his eyes, and he was alone with the murderers. No, not alone, a pull at his trousers told him Nigger was with him. He drew his two revolvers. There were twelve Chinamen. Could he shoot them all before he could be rushed? He placed a weapon through each eye and waited till he who had been the leader came into range. Incidentally, he also listened to the conversation they carried on in a strange sort of English. "My wold! we got 'em all light. Plospectol allee samee fools," spoke one man. "We catchy him evely time."

"Wha' fo' odel fellows no' come along?" demanded another. "Time they wele hele now."

"Odel fellows out help niggels; faces painted black so niggels get all blame if the Govelment evel heal of it," the leader said. "My wold! we'll have no fooly white plospectol down hele. Killee 'em all an' blame niggels fol it. If tloopels come along they see us allee samee wolking men; no' know this town only hele to dlaw 'em, an' that all fellows live in secler place an' wolk gleat gold beds."

"Thele no' be white plospectol anywhele aloud hele now?" asked another man.

"No, allee killee. Byambye, when fools down hele get dlownd or die from snake we go down an' git all thel gold," said the leader. "Wha' say you fellows?"

Joss been good this moln ; I say we telly him that an' stickee some mole pins in him fol next time."

A shout of approval greeted the leader's words, and the dance stopped.

"I'll sticky flst pin," the leader cried, advancing to the joss in which Tom was concealed, while the others stood waiting for some sign of favour from the god, and ready, if it were not forthcoming, to demolish him, or at least punish him severely. These Chinese were not followers of the great Confucius. Very few are, out of China proper, and they had a new joss every week. Joss was not held in much respect among the people who made him.

The man pushed a pin into the god's wooden body, and was in the act of drawing back to admire his handiwork when joss spoke, but not in the way he was wont to speak when the spiritual leaders of his people were inside. His right eye flashed fire, and the daring man who had insulted him fell back with a scream of pain, while a sound as of the beating of many drums filled the air.

"Joss angly," yelled one of the onlookers, running to the door of the store. "We comee back an' choppy him upy."

As if in answer to his insolent threat, the joss's left eye flashed fire, and the man who was to come back and chop him up subsided with a shriek.

For a moment the joss worshippers stood thunder-struck. Only once before had they known their joss to stand on his dignity and use the great powers conferred upon him. That joss had long since gone the way of most josses, for he had ordered them to leave the white prospectors alone, and they had no use for such a silly joss as could give such a command. But he had emphasised his desires at the time by emitting

strange noises which they could not understand, and so they fled from his awful presence until they had armed themselves with axes and knives and other wood-cutting weapons.

This joss was clearly exceeding his duty, too, and when a third man fell and the tom-tom-like noise still continued, the rest rushed for the door terror-stricken. Before they got through a fourth man went down, and then, yelling like the fiends they were, they tore along the street to some safe place—and to the most convenient store where axes could be obtained.

Then Tom came out of the friendly joss, whose hollow inside had helped him so much by echoing and re-echoing his revolver shots, and prepared for whatever was to follow. But first he bundled the four wounded men in a heap and tied their pigtails together, pulling them so tight that the men could not possibly rise without scalping each other. They screamed frightfully while he did so, but Tom did not mind in the slightest. And now he bethought himself of his comrades. He had little hope that they were alive, but suddenly noticing that Nigger was sniffing around eagerly, he waited for a lull in the Celestials' shrieking and shouted, "Parson, are you alive?"

The Chinamen paused to hear the reply, but when promptly there floated back, "God save the King! but that's Tom's voice," they began afresh. But Tom had heard, and lying flat on the floor, he put his mouth to the parting line of the sections and shouted, "Stand as clear as you can, boys, there's visitors coming."

The Chinamen yelled more than ever on hearing this announcement. Well they knew who the visitors were to be, yet they dare not move for fear of losing their pigtails, and better in their minds to lose life than suffer that everlasting disgrace.



"THE REST RUSHED FOR THE DOOR, TERROR-STRICKEN."

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"Hurry then, Tom, if you can do the trick," the parson's voice called back. "The water is nearly up to our necks, and still rising, and a ledge on which we might prolong the agony is covered with the most poisonous reptiles——"

The parson probably said more, but Tom didn't hear him if he did; he had run to where he knew the floor-controlling device was hidden, and in a second had lifted a lever from a notch and allowed it to fly upwards. He did not know if he was setting the proper mechanism in motion or not, but the black hole which suddenly and silently appeared at his feet, and into which the four Chinamen had been hurled, satisfied him upon that point, and he peered into the gloom beneath.

"Where are you, boys?" he cried above the din made by the new visitors; "I can't see you."

"But we can see you," Dirty Sam answered. "See if you can find a rope anywhere, and lower one end of it."

Tom ran round the ledge left of the flooring, kicking over boxes and cases, most of which fell into the hole below, and caused Dave to repeat the titles of every song and hymn in his repertoire. At length Tom found a coil of rope, and making one end fast round the corner support of the building, he dropped the coil into the depths. Next moment Dirty Sam came up hand over hand, and while Mike remained below to keep the rope taut, Dave and the parson followed. Then the men hauled Mike aloft, and they all sat down and looked at each other. They were soaking, but no one seemed to mind that fact, and after a moment's silence they all burst out laughing.

"Tom, my boy," the parson said, "I don't know how you have done it, nor how you bested those beggars floundering in their own trap, but——"

"Nigger says some one is coming," Tom interrupted, running round the ledge to the open door. "It's the same people coming back with axes and hammers," he cried, looking out. "What shall we do?"

"Gather together just inside the doorway," advised the parson, "and trust to Providence."

On came the howling mob of joss smashers. They reached the doorway, and the first two men, pushed inside by the crowd behind, straightway fell through the open floor. The next two uttered a yell of horrified amazement, and endeavoured to turn along the ledge, but Sam and Mike assisted them in their first course, and they, too, went below. But all were now inside, blinking stupidly at the gulf which opened before them. They did not see the white men yet, but too late they heard them.

"Come on, lads," shouted the parson, "there are only four of them. Take one each."

"Howling dingoes!—I mean Great Britain and Ireland!" cried Dave, "you just bet we will."

The Chinese turned to run, but strong hands gripped each by the pigtail, and next moment the remaining men, shrieking and cursing and crying on their joss in turn, were hurled into the gulf. But joss heard them not.

"What can I do for you to-day, boys?" Dave asked, rubbing his hands together as he thought all storekeepers did. "I have a nice line in tea, and—God save the King! you yellow beggars down there make less noise. Ain't ye gettin' a much-needed wash?"

"I see a lot of people approaching from the other side of the town," cried Tom from the doorway; "I think they are natives."

"No, they are only disguised as natives" said the

parson. "Come on, boys, don't wait to replenish our stores. Probably all the stuff is poisoned, any way——"

"I don't care a first rose of summer," muttered Dave, "I'm going to have this hymn-book——"

"That isn't a hymn-book," Tom laughed. "That is a list of cures effected by the use of—of a certain much-advertised patent medicine."

"I'll take it, anyhow," said Dave, and next minute they were hurrying out of the village. And none too soon, for while they struggled up the hill over the abandoned "workings" a crowd of pigtailed black men came up to the scene of their adventures.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHINESE OF THE HOLLOW MOUNTAIN

"WELL, boys, what is next on the programme?" Dirty Sam asked as they entered the gully where their horses were. "Is it saddle up and clear out?"

"No," answered the parson, "it is not. We'll remove our horses to the other end of the gully, which I happen to know is pretty high up in the range. There we will camp, and set about working the gold deposits which are in all the creeks."

"All right, parson, you are boss," responded Mike, as they caught their steeds and made everything ready for moving up the gully; "but I reckon you should explain what you know of this place we struck to-day, in which, but for Tom, we should have staked off our last claims."

"Yes, I will tell you, boys. Tom, you have heard coming up of how Mike and Sam have discovered that they are friends, and you have told us how you were enabled to save us from a fate which is unpleasant to think of. Now I shall tell part of a story I know. In the first place, boys, from what Tom has told you, you know that the township down below us is a decoy; that is, it is intended to make the chance prospector or Government Inspector, or any one,

believe that it is an honest Chinese trading centre, existing chiefly to supply the wants of white prospectors. But it supplies no white prospectors with anything else than excitement, as you have experienced. Yet it accounts for the presence of the Chinese. These Chinese, however, do not live in their town—at least, the majority do not, for there are many hundreds of them round here—they have a secret city or camp, and the place in which we were exists to satisfy any one that the Chinese are a much-abused race, and I have no doubt that those who do reside in it pay their poll-taxes regularly. However, the people who live and work in the secret camp are the same as those who attacked several parties with which I was associated, and whom, to evade, Mike's comrades disguised themselves as natives, just as these Chinese have done recently to cover their attack upon us. Well, to cut the story short, this district is enormously rich in gold, and the Chinese are determined to have it to themselves. The people down south will not believe the prospectors' stories, and the yellowmen are careful never to give themselves away by attacking a party they can't annihilate completely unless they can get the aborigines blamed for the affair. But the white prospector is not always a fool, and where gold is, you may be certain, there he shall be also, whether it is in ice-bound zones, in fever swamps, or on scorching deserts. Well, Tom saw our present enemies apparently coming out of a cellar into one of the larger buildings, from which fact it is clear to me that there is a passage underground from the decoy or show city to their 'workings' or hidden camp. It was some of these workers we met to-day. Doubtless they came in for stores, and were more surprised than we were when we saw each other, having been of

opinion that every white man in the country had fallen victims to the combined attacks of their comrades who could be spared and the aborigines whom they persuaded to help them.

"But the prospector quickly suits himself to his environment, and as the party Mike knew disguised themselves as natives, so likely there are other parties who have adopted other schemes to enable them to work the rich formations. I know of at least one such party, and as soon as I can make arrangements I shall take you to their camp. It is near here and in its members you will all find old friends. Meanwhile, here is an ideal spot for a camp. We can hold this place against an army, for nature protects us on three sides, and on the fourth we can erect a barricade of timber. There is a spring of good water over at the base of that lime bluff formation——"

"You seem to be mighty well acquainted up here, parson," said Mike; "I don't remember a thing about the place, but I am sure I was never here before."

"No, you were on the other side of the range, but I have gone over all the country around, and know every foot of it."

"By the black bloodwood-tree!" cried Dave, "but you could give points to our old friend Chillagoe Charlie, parson."

"That is not a hymn, Dave," said the parson, with a laugh. "And I thought you said you were Chillagoe Charlie?"

"Three yards to the left! But I had forgotten all about me being Charlie," wailed Dave. "Why didn't ye keep me in mind, boys?"

"Ah well, never mind just now, Dave," Mike advised. "It is about time we had something to eat, and if you set a fire going, I'll bring some water."

"And we'll have a spell for the rest of the day," said Dave. "What with gettin' half drowned, an' other things, I am a bit tired, an' I reckon we can hold out against the Chinkies here even if we are sleepin'."

Shortly after the horses were given a drink, and set free to graze upon some good grass at the head of the gully, and by that time the billy was boiling and the men sat down to a lunch of "tinned dog" and copious draughts of boiling tea. When this was over, they built a crude erection behind which they might shelter if attacked, and when their labours were completed the sun had almost reached the top of the distant sand ridges over towards the Gulf. Another pannikin of tea and some more tinned meat was then partaken of for supper, and soon after, when the sun disappeared and darkness fell over the land, they stretched themselves out on the ground and went to sleep, careless alike of the sounds which a gust of the night breeze occasionally brought up from the Chinese city, and of the fact that they were only five men and a dog in the midst of hostile blacks and murderous yellowmen. And the stars crept up the great dome overhead.

The excitement of the day had left Tom's nerves at high tension, and, unlike his hardened comrades, he could not sleep. First, he wondered if the Chinese he had shot and tied together would be rescued. Then remembering that they had left the floor open, and feeling assured that the returning population would speedily notice that fact and inquire into the matter, he managed to dismiss that subject from his brain. But then a flood of memories burst upon him, and his mind mixed them up in hopeless confusion. What were they doing in among secret cities and black-faced Chinese? And what had Chillagoe Charlie to do with

it all ? Then his thoughts underwent a kaleidoscopic change, and he followed out the story of Mike and Sam and wondered if he would suddenly discover that Dave or the parson were his lost uncle. At last he fell into a troubled sleep in which Dave's last supposed song titles assumed gigantic importance in his roving fancy. "By the black bloodwood-tree. Three yards to the left," he murmured, "at one shilling and threepence a box." He suddenly awoke and found himself repeating these words. He saw by the stars that it was not yet midnight, and then with a start he realised that more than he could not sleep ; the parson was not where he had lain down. "He'll have gone for a walk in the cool night air," Tom said to himself, "and I think I'll do the same." His eyes fell on Dave's sleeping form, and by his side he saw the patent medicine booklet he had been carefully reading by firelight before falling asleep. "I must see where he got that black bloodwood-tree quotation," Tom muttered, lifting the book and turning over the pages. But it was too dark to read the words, so he arose and threw some light branches on the fire, and in the light of the resulting blaze he again examined the book. It seemed as if nothing was to reward his search, however, for the pages merely extolled the virtues of the "cure all" it was advertising, although how it had come to be found in a Chinese store—or trap—in the heart of the Peninsula was more than Tom could understand. He was about to throw it down with a laugh at the idea that it contained information valuable to him when his eye caught the now familiar words, "By the black bloodwood-tree," scrawled in pencil at the top of one of the pages. "That has been written by some prospector whom likely the Chinese have murdered," Tom remarked, going to the beginning of the book again to look for

further writings. He soon found another inscription. On a leaf near the beginning were the words: "At head of parson's gully." He turned over quickly but carefully, and next read, when halfway through the book, the words of his first discovery. A few pages further on he came to: "Three yards to the left," and on the last page, "Keep close to right wall."

"Ah well," he soliloquised, "that is a meaningless jargon of words. I'll try to go to sleep now." He stretched himself out again, but, despite his utmost efforts of will power to restrain them, the words he had read danced through his brain, sinking themselves into his inner consciousness as if they were made of fire.

"Come on, Nigger, we'll go for a walk," he said at length, jumping up. "Perhaps this is parson's gully we are in just now."

Nigger did not seem to care much whether it was parson's gully or any other gully, but, as in duty bound, he arose, shook himself, and followed his master. Very soon Tom saw that this camp lay almost at the head of the gorge, a fact he had not noticed particularly before, and he had not gone many steps when a strange thrill ran through his being. The black glistening rocks rose before him, and close beside him stood a large bloodwood-tree. It was black, for it had been struck by lightning.

"At head of parson's gully, by black bloodwood-tree," repeated Tom. "Well, Nigger, we'll see what there is three yards to the left. I presume the spot is in those rocks. Jupiter! There is a hole in them, and some one has been here lately, for the ground around is padded hard." He struck a match and peered into the hole; it was just large enough to admit a man's body, but it might be the home of a family

of ferocious dingoes, so Tom was very careful. But suddenly he uttered a shout. As his match was going out he saw an ordinary trouser button lying just inside the hole. Tom struck another match and pushed himself through the entrance. "Keep close to right wall," he repeated. "Well, I fancy I will, but I may have to go back to camp for a candle." He paused to light another match and again wriggled forward, hoping any poisonous reptiles that might be in the passage would have the good sense to get out of his way. "We are very foolish in crawling into a hole which might be the den of all sorts of creatures," he went on, speaking to Nigger, who somehow had got before him. "But I trust to you, Nigger, to clear the way, and who knows but we may stumble across this wonderful secret city the parson talks of." Nigger answered with an encouraging bark, and suddenly Tom found he was at the end of the narrow passage. Another match showed him he was in a large cave which stretched forwards and downwards further than his flickering light could penetrate. He rose to his feet and looked behind him, and the first thing he saw was a box of candles resting in a recess cut out in the rocks. "We're getting on, Nigger," he said. "We are explorers worthy of the Royal Geographical Society's medal, and if I ever get that I'll hang it round your neck."

But Nigger was not in a mood for compliments. Clearly he thought they were on important business, and he was sniffing about very suspiciously. When Tom lit a candle, however, he barked and ran into the gloom of the cavern and his master followed a little bit more carefully, keeping the right wall in touch.

It was an eerie place they had entered; the roof was now high above them, and from it great glis-

tening stalactites hung in fairy-like clusters, while white ivory-like ferns and mosses gleamed in the candle light from every little recess in the rocks. Tom knew at once that he was in one of the great limestone caverns for which North Queensland was celebrated, but he was puzzled to account for the presence of such a formation in the heart of a range that certainly was not limestone externally. Then he recalled the lecture the parson had given him at their first meeting, and remembered his words about the tremendous convulsions the country of the north had undergone. "I needn't attempt to reason out things," he said to himself, "I simply can't do it, and anyway my present business is to see where this mysterious cavern leads to——"

A bark from his dog warned him to be careful and a cool wave of air blew across his face. He stopped instantly, and making a reflector of his hands cast his candle light ahead. It was well he did so, or he might have found out in a manner too abrupt to be pleasant where the cavern led to—vertically. He was on the verge of a precipice, the depths to which it descended being far beyond the zone of his feeble light. "By Jove! Nigger," he ejaculated, "I had forgotten all about keeping close to the right wall, but I don't think I'll forget after seeing this." He gingerly made his way over to the wall which had so suddenly receded from him, and without giving a thought to the dangers of a return journey, continued to follow Nigger along a fairly well-defined pathway which flanked the great abyss. At times he fancied he saw small points of light dancing in the depths, but he concluded that these were only reflections cast by some of the mirror-like carbonate of lime formations, and turned his face to the wall so that he might not see their strangely alluring flashes. And now many varieties of winged creatures sought to

bar his passage, and he had to strike out blindly to ward them off. He was greatly afraid that Nigger in an excess of zeal might follow the bat-like things over the ledge, but soon, to his surprise, he noticed that they left Nigger severely alone, and that he did not concern himself about them. The reason was made apparent, a huge bat-winged monstrosity flapped past him singeing its leathery wings in his candle flame. Next moment it had struck the wall with terrific force, and tumbled over the ledge into the unfathomable darkness. Tom relit the candle, which had been extinguished by the wind of the wings, and next instant the performance was repeated by another creature, whose cries as it fell backward into the gloom seemed half human. It was now plain to Tom that it was the light which attracted the denizens of the vast cave, and feeling that he had no right to be the cause of their death, he stood for a moment in the darkness to consider how he could avoid being so. The easy answer would be to go back, but Tom's love of adventure was too great to allow of his thinking of that for a moment. He felt that he was going to make some discovery, and he was determined to follow out the instructions in Dave's borrowed booklet to the end.

"Hallo, Nigger," he said, "what do you think?" Nigger was sitting down waiting on his master to proceed, apparently wondering why he was hesitating. He answered with a bark which as clearly as Nigger could voice said, "Come on," and then with a start Tom realised that if he could see Nigger there must also be light enough to see the ledge. And there was; where it came from Tom could not discover, but the fact remained that a dim vapoury sort of light extended in front of him. He started off again at once, and Nigger ran ahead to clear away all snakes. The

pathway now began to lead downwards at a steeper angle, and Tom felt he was also working round the walls of the vast hollow mountain, as if he were descending a spiral stairway. Soon the way became level again, and, looking round, Tom saw that the abyss had disappeared, that in fact he was standing at the bottom of the precipice over which, at first, he had nearly fallen. He gazed around with interest, a gurgling stream flowed past in a narrow channel worn out of the rocky floor. He stepped over to it, and the sight of the clear crystal water—so unusual in the Gulf country—made him thirsty at once. It was as cold as ice, too, and Tom felt that by its banks, even in the perpetual semi-gloom life, might be bearable and even enjoyable. He was not yet seasoned to the scorching sun and the burnt sand-wastes of the north country. He drank deeply and laved his face with the delightful water, Nigger, not content with drinking his fill, having gone for a swim in it. Suddenly, however, Nigger sprang out on the rocky bank and uttered a low growl. He even refrained from shaking himself at the moment, and to Tom, who knew every little habit of his dog so well, this neglect told that Nigger had suddenly scented danger of a kind that might be precipitated by even a movement on their part. He stood for a long time trying to discover the reason of the dog's alarm, but he could see nothing beyond a few yards radius, nor could he hear anything suspicious. Nigger stood listening, too, with tail and ears erect. Clearly he was not sure himself of the nature of the impending trouble. At length he moved forward cautiously, and Tom, following twenty yards or so, found he had reached the opposite wall. But Nigger evidently was now on the track of something, and keeping close behind him Tom turned along the face

of the rock. He expected matters to develop without much warning, and he was not mistaken. He had only gone a few yards when the wall he was hugging ended abruptly in a corner, and he was gazing at a brightly blazing fire round which were grouped about a dozen men.

Smothering an exclamation of astonishment, and holding Nigger from running forward, he threw himself upon the rocky floor and lay flat. He now understood where the peculiar light which had shown him the way down originated, and when, on looking up through the smoky darkness, he saw the shadow which marked the ledge along which he had travelled, he knew he had descended the inside of a huge dome-shaped cavern and that the lights he had fancied he had seen were reflections of the camp fire near which he was now standing. The stream of water Nigger and he had sampled fell in a shimmering cascade from a point half way up the face of the wall which formed the precipice which had first interrupted his course, but the point where the smoke of the fire found egress the darkness overhead hid from his sight. He brought his eyes lower and saw against the many ever-changing shadows great well-defined streaks in the rocks which he knew were veins of some mineral substance. One such lode ran through the wall close beside him. It seemed to carry a dense black material almost identical with the stuff he had found south of the Mitchell and which Dirty Sam had said was of no value. It was apparent that these lodes were the cause of the presence of men in the heart of the mountain. "It must have been some place like this the parson was thinking of when he explained the theory of fissure lodes formations," Tom muttered to himself; "I can well understand that this mountain when first heaved above the



"THAT MAN WAS VERY NEAR HIS END AT THAT MOMENT."

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plains was solid, but consisted of limestone with a cap of harder rock. Then the tropical rains, working through, gradually carried away all the soluble carbonate of lime in solution, and as a result this mountain is now a mere shell. But, as the parson told me, it is invariably at the point of contact of limestone and other rocks that the mineral deposits exist——”

Nigger was not interested in Tom's discourse, and signified his disapproval by tugging at Tom's shirt.

“Don't worry, Nigger,” Tom remonstrated; “I am not forgetting that we are intruders. But these men must be the members of the camp the parson told us he knew, and I have no doubt will not be displeased to see us. Come, we'll go and introduce ourselves, although one o'clock in the morning is rather an odd time for that ceremony.” He rose to his feet, and began walking towards the men, who were talking together very animatedly. “Hallo, boys!” he called out; “I——” He did not complete his sentence, for as the men all jumped up at the sound of his voice, he made a startling discovery and dropped to the ground at once. They had all pigtails!

Tom held his breath and lay still in the shadow of the wall, and Nigger also made himself as invisible as possible. “I've done it this time,” Tom muttered helplessly. Nevertheless he drew his two revolvers and waited. The men looked round in evident surprise, and one walked up so close to where Tom lay that he could have touched him. That man was very near his end at that moment, but a merciful Providence made him pause and turn even as Tom was in the act of applying pressure to the trigger of the weapon in his right hand.

“It's nothing,” the man said, going back to the fire and lighting his pipe and sitting down among his

comrades. The men went on talking as if nothing had happened to disturb them, and Tom began to breathe again. He knew he could not understand their conversation even although he might crawl near enough to overhear, so, with wonderful prudence—at least for him—he decided not to make a closer acquaintance with the pig-tailed people.

But the spirit of adventure was strong within him, and he had no intention of leaving the place until he had found out as much as he could about it and its strange inhabitants.

"I can see picks and shovels and other mining tools at the base of the rocks beyond the fire," he whispered to Nigger. "Are you game to wriggle round to see what mineral it is that those Chinese are working?"

Nigger did not express any objection, and they started to work their way along the shadows at the foot of the wall, hoping to be able to pass the fire and those sitting around it without their knowledge. Tom had already assimilated the characteristic traits of the Gulf country pioneers, the chief of which were a reckless—almost foolish—disregard of danger, and a total absence of fear. His one idea now was to get near enough to where the men had evidently recently been working, and he smiled as he thought of how he would surprise Mike and Sam with his story in the morning, and of the lecture he was sure to receive from the parson.

But getting past the camp fire was not such an easy task as he had anticipated, as he soon discovered. The fire was giving off a heat that made those sitting round it extend their circle, and two men were squatting on the ground with their backs only about six feet from the wall along which he and Nigger

were to pass. Tom did not alter his plans, however, and foot by foot crawled nearer. He had no eyes but for that six-foot passage, and he hoped that the fire flames would die down a bit before he reached it, as they were giving off more light than was necessary for him to see.

Nearer and nearer he approached. The sound of the conversation rang in his ears, but he heeded not. And now he was directly behind the man who sat nearest the wall. He felt an almost irresistible impulse to give his pigtail a pull—he would have received the greatest surprise of the evening had he done so—but he mastered his inclination and crept past safely into the flickering shadows beyond.

"I don't think much of the Chinese brain-box after all," he remarked to Nigger *sotto voce*. "They are supposed to be so clever, and all that; but what other people would have rested contentedly after having distinctly heard the voice of an intruder?"

"Hallo, boys!" The salutation came from behind the group around the fire, and caused Tom to feel as if he had received a powerful electric shock. The words were the same as those he had used, and came from about the same place. The men sprang to their feet and ran to meet the speaker with a cry which might have been one of welcome or the reverse, and taking advantage of the diversion Tom rose and ran farther into the darkness. He knew now why the Chinese had not been unduly disturbed when he had called out to them; they had been expecting a visitor, and this time he had arrived.

"It's good for us anyway, Nigger," he muttered. "They'll probably be so much taken up with the new-comer that they'll neither hear nor see us. I wonder who he can be, though, and if he came in the same

way as I did ? Jupiter ! He must have passed our camp if he did——Hullo ! this is gold." Tom bent down to examine some mineral substance lying in a crudely constructed inclined plane he had stumbled across at the base of the front of rock which barred his farther progress, and promptly forgot all about the Chinese and their night visitor. The walls of the rock were tunnelled in every direction wherever one of the black lodes appeared to pass in the vicinity, and from the appliances used in the extraction and separation of the material which were lying about, Tom knew at once that gold was the mineral the Chinese were working. A minute's investigation showed him also that the lodes were composed of the same stuff he had shown to Dirty Sam. He could not understand how gold came to exist in such profuse quantities as the sizes of the parallel lodes seemed to indicate it did, nor could he realise how it existed in lode formation at all, having always associated the precious metal with a more or less undefined quartz environment. He entered one of the "drives" or tunnels and walked along until a sudden swerve in its course hid the light of the camp fire, then lighting the candle he had carried in his belt since extinguishing it, he examined his surroundings intently. The tunnels had been driven into the lodes, and the black material of which they were composed still formed the roof and floor.

"By Jupiter ! Nigger," he exclaimed, "if this really carries gold we're in one of the richest mines in the world. And to think that it is in the hands of the Chinese !" Nigger did not seem to care whether it were Chinese or Hottentots who owned the mine, and catching sight of the end of the drive at that moment, Tom lost interest in its ownership too, in his eagerness

to inspect the last point worked by the miners. The air was very oppressive in the tunnel and his candle would scarcely burn, yet his desire for knowledge or, rather, love of adventure—inquisitiveness some people might call it—made him advance to the end, and there he found drills, hammers, and picks, lying as they had been left when the miners last ceased working. He seized a pick and dug out some pounds' weight of the ore material and tied it up in his handkerchief. "I suppose we'd better think about getting back now, Nigger," he remarked; "I can assay this stuff to-morrow, or, rather, when daylight comes, and the parson will know what to do then."

He turned to retrace his steps, but had not got clear of the drive when he became aware that the men were approaching to show their last results to the newcomer. "Caught again," he muttered, blowing out his light; "I doubt it's all up this time." He had no time to think, and even although that had been granted him he could not have reasoned out any possible means of escape. He was in a tunnel, five feet six inches in height, and three and a half feet wide, and even then the tunnel sloped with the lode at an angle of forty-five degrees. "Save yourself, Nigger," he said in a low voice, but the dog made no answer, and at that moment the Chinese entered the drive. Instinctively he clung close to the "underlie" wall. He had no hope, but he did not intend to precipitate matters.

"Yes," said one, evidently, from his English, the visitor, "I have had an active time since leaving you, and we had quite an adventure in the village to-day."

Tom started violently. It was surely the parson's voice he heard. The others laughed and talked together as they advanced, but Tom's wonder held him spell-bound until the men were upon him, then,

unable to retain his bent position longer, he stood erect and came into violent contact with one of the pigtailed miners. The man uttered a series of unintelligible sounds with great fervour, and Tom was reminded of Dave's method of expressing his feelings. But an idea had come to him. He stepped boldly out among the people, somewhat surprised to find that most of them had to stoop considerably to travel along the passage, and walked with them. Of course it was absolutely dark, for no one had as yet struck a light. He did not intend to linger in their society, however, and gradually allowed the unsuspecting men to leave him behind.

"Strike a light, some of you," the voice he thought he knew so well then cried; "we'll risk the closeness for a minute or two, and I can't see this wonderful ore chute in the dark."

A candle was lit immediately, but Tom was now lying flat on the floor. He had thought for a moment of calling out to the supposed parson, but the fear that he might have been mistaken in the voice prevented him, and next moment he laughed at the idea of the parson being a member of a gang of Chinese. "My imagination must be pretty powerful," he muttered, "and my nerves must have gone wrong."

But his nerves were really in first-class condition, and he was just preparing to follow the Chinese along the drive to look for Nigger, when that wonderfully gifted quadruped gave his trouser leg a pull, as was his habit when he desired his master to know of his presence. Tom thereupon rose to his feet and turned to leave the drive, but before doing so he looked at the people in front, now plainly discernible in the candle light, to see if he could recognise any of the Chinese he had seen in the village. But they were all strange to him, and all dressed alike in blue silk smocks, most

aggressive pigtailed hanging down their backs. They were certainly tall for Chinamen, but Tom thought the angle at which they had to stand while in the drive might account for that impression. He was now on the safe side of them, and nothing separated him from his comrades but the journey up the circling ledge, which he knew would be but a small matter to him. Then a chill ran through him—he was getting used to them now. One of the men had turned round to address the others, and Tom noticed he had no pigtail, and was dressed as an ordinary white prospector. But a mask concealed his face, and on seeing this the truth dawned on him—it was Chillagoe Charlie! A wild suspicion rushed through Tom's brain. Could he and the parson be one and the same, and was the parson leading his comrades into a trap? Could he really be friendly with the people whom he had so often expressed himself as being so bitterly against? In any case what was he doing here, and what would Sam, Mike, and Dave say?

"Come on, Nigger; I must be mad," he said, running out of the drive. "If I stay here any longer I'll be seeing Mr. Hornsby, and Mike, and Sam among the Chinese." He ran up to the fire, now deserted, and threw a brief glance around. Some of the men had been sitting on old packing-boxes, and he promptly overturned these, finding in one a small mirror and a comb, in another a piece of soap and a toothbrush. A third, on being kicked over, disclosed an English Bible, and a fourth a pack of playing-cards. Evidently these jam and condensed milk cases were used by those to whom they belonged as a containing medium for their personal property, and Tom marvelled greatly at the absence of Chinese trifles. Razors and shaving brushes were there, and in one box reposed a blotting

pad, with pen and ink. He went round them all, and was about to depart when he noticed Nigger's actions at the foot of the wall on the opposite side of the fire from where he was. The dog had scented out a recess in the rocks which had a wire gauze screen in front of it. He had pulled the screen away by some means and was now gorging himself with what had been contained behind. Tom ran over and found that his dog had discovered the camp larder, and of which, doubtless knowing that it belonged to the enemy, he was making sad havoc, not having had any food for more hours than he could count. Tom pulled him away and saw that the recess was well filled with most things pleasing to the white man's appetite, and he now knew, or thought he knew, where the parson had got his supplies the previous morning, for there was a case almost filled with eggs in one corner and over a dozen hams bearing a brand which Tom had reason to believe marked only the best.

"Well, Nigger," he said, "I don't know if it is stealing to take things from the Chinese, but I am going to provide breakfast for the camp this morning, as the parson did before. I don't know where the Chinese keep the hens that laid those eggs or I'd have one of them too, but this will do in the meantime." He filled his pockets with eggs and appropriated one of the hams. "We'll go now, Nigger," he continued ; "I hear the population coming back. By Jupiter ! though, people needn't tell me after this that the Chinese are strict vegetarians."

He ran round the bluff just as the Chinese returned to their camp fire and turned for a last look at them. They, apparently, had not noticed that their seats had been knocked over, or, if they had, doubtless thought it had been done by themselves. "That is my idea

then," he heard the well-known voice say; "and I believe it will all come right in the end."

Tom's brain was in a whirl, but he knew it must be getting near dawn, and that his place should be with his comrades. Perhaps they could unravel the mystery of Chillagoe Charlie's presence here. He made his way quickly along the level bottom of the cave, crossed the stream, and then began the spiral-like climb to the top. Nothing interfered with his progress, for his eyes were now accustomed to the darkness, and soon he was crawling through the hole that led to the outer world.

A few minutes later he rushed into the camp where his comrades still slept. The stars showed it was still an hour from sunrise. The first figure he saw was that of the parson; he was fast asleep.

"I must have been dreaming, Nigger," he muttered, throwing himself down.

"God save the King! Get to sleep and make less noise, kid," came a drowsy response from one of the recumbent forms, and a minute or so after Tom was sleeping.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP AMONG THE RANGES

"**H**ERE we suffer grief and pain ! Are you sure you didn't dream all this yarn, Tom ?"

"I am quite sure, Dave, and this stuff I have just assayed is fairly good proof, I think. I dug it out from the end of the Chinamen's drive, as I told you, and you can see now for yourself that it is some strange ore which carries over three ounces of free gold to the ton——"

"It's that bit about Charlie I can't understand," put in Dirty Sam. "What is he doing among Chinamen ? And how did he get up here before us——?"

"I can't get the hang of that either," said Mike, in tones which showed his bewilderment. "If it weren't that Tom brought back tangible proof in the shape of that bacon and eggs—but wait ! The parson did that too yesterday."

All looked at the parson. He was intently watching a second precipitate beginning to settle in the pickle-bottle in which Tom had carried out his assay for gold.

"Yes," he remarked slowly ; "I was exploring a bit too. In fact, boys, Tom's story in the main is correct. There is a secret camp in the heart of this mountain. I didn't tell you, for reasons which will be explained

very soon now. But, Tom, I must ask you not to go off by yourself during the night. It is risky in this part of the world."

"But you were away yourself, sir, when I left the camp——?"

"Was I? Ah! then that accounts for your associating me with our masked friend. Your love of romance and powerful imagination would easily build up a chain of apparently circumstantial proof. But we'll get ready and move away from this place. There are white men on the other side of the ridge, and it is time we were farther away from the village down on the plains."

"What is that stuff coming down in the bottle, Tom?" Sam asked abruptly, noticing that a flaky white deposit had accumulated at the bottom of the solution from which Tom had already extracted the gold.

"That is the mineral of which the lode is composed—that black stuff which has cheated so many people. The Chinese found out, however, that although it might be valueless in itself, it carried free gold blackened with sulphur."

"More than the Chinese discovered that, Tom," the parson observed. "There have never been any assayers up here, but it did not take the prospectors much time to realise that the heavy black sand they got by panning that ore was gold. They now burn off the sulphur before washing, and the camp of which your uncle was a member gained a considerable amount of gold that way. It seems to me, though, that you have made another discovery in that mysterious formation."

Tom held the bottle to the sunlight, and all crowded around eagerly. Slowly the white deposit took on a tinge of purple, which grew darker and darker until

blue became the colour of the substance. A minute later and this had changed to a dull black mass.

"Why, Tom, that is silver!" exclaimed the parson, somewhat excitedly. "We've tried it for silver scores of times, but could find no trace."

Tom laid down the bottle. "Yes, it is silver," he said. "And there must be about five hundred ounces of it to the ton of ore."

"But," began Sam, "I have been in parties which tried it for silver too, and couldn't get any. Jove! if you are right, Tom, this north country is made of that stuff."

Tom felt important for the first time in his life. "It is silver," he said, "but only a first-class analyst could have discovered that fact——"

"Britannia rules the sand-ridges!" cried Dave, "but you are more than first-class, Tom."

"No, Dave; I did not mean that. I meant what I said, but I could not have told you had it not been that my late employer in Sydney received an unknown ore from the Broken Hill mines to assay. No one knew what it was, and it had been left alone by the mine managers for a long time, for seemingly it was not silver nor anything of value. But my employer was a first-class chemist and analyst, and after much experiment, in which I assisted, he found that the discarded ore was really a chloro-bromide of silver, which of course explained why the ordinary assays could not determine its nature. This ore is not the same in appearance as the Broken Hill stuff, and it occurs in much larger lodes apparently; but I remembered the tests, and half suspecting that it might be a chloro-bromide, or something which would answer to the same tests, I applied them, and you see the results."

"And it means, Tom," the parson said, "more than

can be readily imagined—it means that the many hundred tons already treated for its gold contents and thrown away can be taken up again and made to yield its silver spoil. It also means that in the working of the numerous well-known lodes of that ore, hitherto thought unprofitable to handle, the prospectors and miners of the North will find employment that will yield a handsome return for their labours.”

“Then let us go out and prospect for some good shows now,” put in Dirty Sam. “When the news leaks out, the country will be so overrun with prospectors that our chances of finding anything good will not amount to much.”

“Home, sweet home!” yelled Dave. “Aint we got our claims already? Hasn’t Tom found a Chinkies’ camp working the stuff? They have no right to it. They is not Australians. I vote we go and hunt them outen their show and work it ourselves.”

“You would have your work cut out if you tried that, Dave,” the parson said, with a laugh. “We’ll leave the Chinese gentry alone and——”

“When Johnnie comes slinkin’ home! We won’t get the chance,” interrupted Dave. “See what’s comin’ up the gully. Out with your guns, boys, an’ git under cover——”

There was reason for Dave’s words. A number of Chinese had suddenly come into sight from the village end of the gorge. They were brandishing clubs, and knives mounted on long handles, and had evidently come out on business that meant trouble for some one. When they saw the white men they uttered a yell of triumph and rushed towards them. A tall, powerful-looking fellow ran in front of the others and charged straight at the parson, who promptly advanced to meet him.

"Take that, you yellow barbarian!" were the parson's first words as they met.

The yellow barbarian took it—it was a blow which felled him as if it had been the kick of a horse. And now the battle was joined. It did not last long. The parson caught two of the Chinamen, and, after knocking their heads together, threw them to the ground and turned his attention to another couple, with whom he did likewise. Dave had got his man down and was going through his pockets, but what he hoped to find therein probably he could not have told himself. Mike and Sam had easily accounted for their opponents, and were looking round for more; but there were none. The last man—the one Tom and Nigger had tackled simultaneously—was flying down the gully, shrieking wildly, carrying Nigger with him hanging on to his pigtail.

"Come back, Nigger!" cried Tom, laughing at his dog's method of fighting Chinamen. "Come back at once!"

"That dog knows how to deal with Chows, anyhow," laughed Dave, toying with his knife suggestively over his terror-stricken victim's head. "They say that a Chinkie won't get into heaven if he has lost his pigtail," he mused. "Is that so, parson?"

The parson at the moment was engaged tying some of the Chinamen together by their pigtails, but he looked up sharply at Dave's words.

"Dave, you cold-blooded reprobate!" he cried. "You know yourself that you might as well kill the man outright as cut off his pigtail. He would probably take his own life rather than endure such a lasting disgrace——"

"No cuty pigtaily!" wailed one of the Celestials, noting with considerable alarm that such a proposition

was the subject of discussion. "Me givy muchy gol', an' it allee samee to white plospectol. Me tellee you gleat secler too. Me know whele to gety muchy gol'."

"An' Chung Fu tellee too," cried another, as Mike bound his appendage to the group already tied up by the parson.

"Wha' fo' you touchy me?" demanded Sam's man, working up a fit of virtuous indignation which afforded Sam much amusement. "I pay poll taxee. You no' light mulder me. I tellee p'lice magistlate, an' he hangy you all upy. He know me an' believe me, fol Ah Sing speaky thuth allee samee him——"

"What a talking-machine you are!" Sam laughed, good-naturedly. "When you speaky thuth will you tell how you attacked us with knives and clubs——?"

"How muchy money to letee me flee?" broke in one who had not yet spoken. "I leady pay fo' gettin' bested. My wold! You bet! Wun Lung no fool. He know white plospectol want money."

"Yes," said the parson, "the poor white prospector wants money, and he suffers a lot to get sufficient for his needs, even to the extent of living in a sun-baked country infested with you people. He doesn't in this case want yours, though, so get up and clear out. If you come within rifle range of us again I'll not be responsible for what happens. Go."

"We can't gety upy," screamed the entangled mass of men as they struggled to regain their feet, almost scalping each other in their vain attempts.

"Here we suffer heat and pain!" roared Dave, making a slight mistake in his quotation. "It are a fact, boys, the Chinkies can't git up, they're hobbled too close. We'll have to cut them loose after all."

He fingered his knife lovingly.

"No, no!" yelled the unfortunate men. "We liky lie hele."

"But we don't liky you lying there," Dirty Sam said. "Lend a hand, boys, and we'll lift them; they can then, with care, walk away at the rate of a mile in a few hours, if they don't trip over each other."

"Which will be sufficient punishment for them," the parson added, as the Chinamen were carefully raised together to a vertical position, they keeping their bodies stiff while the operation was performed.

"Now," said the parson, "some of you will have to walk backwards, and your hair will probably get severe tugs when any of you stumble into holes. It won't come out by the root, however, and I hope your journey will be a lesson to you, and that in future you will steer clear of white prospectors who have no desire to interfere with you."

The Chinamen went, and provided amusement for Dave with their grotesque movements, stumblings, and quarrels, until he suddenly discovered that his comrades had gone up the gully to look for the best road over the last ridge. He hurriedly rejoined them, an idea having just occurred to him that there might be Chinamen lurking behind the many boulders in the gully large enough to conceal them.

"That is the entrance to the cave, over by that half-burnt tree," Tom was saying. "I found complete directions as to finding it in the patent medicine book Dave took away from the village."

"Suppose we go in and have a look at it?" suggested Dirty Sam. "Surely if Tom could dodge among the people we can——"

"Don't be too sure that they wern't aware of Tom's presence," the parson said. "My opinion is that we

should saddle up and get over to the white miners' camp without delay. I don't like the look of things, and I feel certain that the Chinese are up to some game just now."

"That's all very good for you, parson," argued Sam. "The boys of any camp will be glad to have you among them, but we're prospectors ourselves, and it would look as if we were wanting to share in any good thing they may have found, if we force ourselves upon them."

"I'm with you there, Sam," said Mike. "We don't want to share in anything other fellows may have risked a lot to find. We can prospect for ourselves, and with Tom's knowledge of ores we may ride over a valuable reef of that chloro-bromide of silver any moment."

"Gentlemen," spoke the parson, "you are slightly mistaken in one or two things, and perhaps it will be as well if I explain before matters become more complicated. In the first place, I am not visiting this camp I know, as a parson, I am going to it as its chief. I have been expected there for over a week now, but I delayed so as to bring Tom up with me. You men are also expected there some time, because the men know that Mr. Hornsby intended rejoining his old comrades when relieved of the Caledonia Mines management. He and I contributed the money required to erect suitable plant for extracting the gold from the strange ore, and the men of Caledonia Camp—at least those who were with Mr. Hornsby or me during our prospecting trips—have all shares in the commune to which we are now going."

"God save Annie Laurie!" Dave broke in. "Does ye mean to say that the fellows we were with when the Chinkies rushed us are in this camp?"

"Some of them, Dave; also some of those Sam knows, and a good number of the men who took part in that scheme of outwitting the yellowmen by disguising themselves as natives——"

"But, parson," said Mike, "I understood from what you and Mr. Hornsby told me down south that although we were to prospect around, our real business was to hunt up Tom's uncle?"

"That is our real mission up here. He was a member of the camp I have mentioned, and we are to hear of him there."

"One other question then, parson," cried Dirty Sam. "Why did you object so strongly, last year, to our coming north to look for the secret city of the Chinese?"

"Because you might have found it."

"Oh! would that have mattered?"

"Yes; it would have upset the plans of a scheme which will be the talk of Queensland, perhaps of the world, shortly. Boys, I know that secret city, I was not always a wandering parson, only."

"Then this isn't it down this hole here?" Dave asked. "We won't go home till morning, but I was just telling myself a boncer of a story about us seizing it in the middle of the night and getting whips o' gold, and Chinese josses made of diamonds an' opals an'——"

"Screw it off, Dave," growled Dirty Sam; "I can see the parson has a story of his own to spring upon us which will make any other yarn of small account."

"I have, boys, but it will do later. When Tom finds his uncle the whole story will be known, and I have hopes that that time is not more than two days distant. But come, it is getting on in the afternoon; let us gather in the horses and get over the ridge. We must strike the camp before sundown."

"All right, parson," said Mike. "I think I have understood part of your story for some time. Tom Willoughby was a fairly tall man with a full black beard, he was not unlike Long Tom down at Crocodile Crossing?" He looked at the parson curiously as he spoke.

"Yes, the resemblance between them was remarkable. They were comrades, and have undergone many hardships together while pioneering in the great North."

"Ah well," said Dirty Sam, "Long Tom has struck it rich now, for with the Caledonia Company behind the boys of Crocodile Crossing to buy their ore, they'll make a fair fortune very soon."

"And that they owe to Tom here," put in Mike. "I reckon they owe him an interest in Crocodile Crossing mines."

"Which they admit," said the parson. "The leases are held in trust for the men who voluntarily gave their services to Mr. Hornsby when he so much needed help, in the names of Mr. Hornsby, Tom Willoughby, Long Tom's, and my own."

"I don't think I was ever told your name, sir," Tom broke in. "I would like to know it."

The parson laughed. "You ought to know by this time, Tom, that names mean very little up here. You know Mike's story and Dirty Sam's. They have no names other than those titles, nor have I other than that by which I am generally addressed. Still, you may know me by name very soon, but until you do don't inquire further."

The five men and the dog walked over to where the horses were feeding, and led them in to where the packs and saddles were lying. Half an hour afterwards they climbed to the summit of the range, leading

their steeds, and began to descend to the plains on the other side, through which a large tributary of the Palmer River ran its somewhat erratic course. The country on this side of the hill was highly mineralised. Great blows of copper carbonate reared their green crests above smaller outcrops of silver and lead. Other reefs showed the presence of antimony, and some of the highly coloured ores of bismuth.

"This place must be where old Nature keeps her stores," Dave remarked, as his experienced eyes took in the nature of the country. "And to think that the worth-a-guinea-a-box Chows have even got into the inside where the Home, sweet Home stuff grows." Dave spoke very feelingly, but no one made any response. Each had his own thoughts on the subject, and had mentally decided to visit the Chinese before long.

After an hour's travelling the country became more settled, and by exercising extreme caution they were able to ride. Half an hour later they reached the river, and crossing it they rode up the opposite hillside, and entered a gorge very similar in appearance to the one in which they had last camped. This gorge split into several smaller ones as the top of the hill was neared, and finally, after rounding several bluffs in the course of one of these feeders, the parson announced that they had reached their destination.

"But there is no camp here," said Dirty Sam wonderingly, "and our horses can't go over that rock ahead."

"The camp is on the top of that bluff," the parson answered, "and we go up by ladder."

"But our horses?" asked Mike. "How can they go up?"

"They can feed here. Along the top of that rock



"LEADING THEIR STEEDS THEY BEGAN TO DESCEND TO THE
PLAINS ON THE OTHER SIDE."

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in front runs the Government track to the township of Laura, the present terminus of the railway from Cooktown, and the camp is situated right on the road. The workings are scattered throughout the gullies around us, and the men come down the ladder-way every morning and return at sundown. The Chinese dare not come here unless on legitimate business, as the camp is now a Government surveyed site of a township in daily connection with Laura, and if they cause trouble the attention of the Government would be drawn upon them at once. Hitherto, they have occasionally visited the camp to purchase any commodity of which they had run short, and at such times they pretended to be very simple, harmless people. But the men know better than to trust them, and take care that they are never isolated from their comrades while working in the more distant gullies. I expect the yellowmen will cause trouble before long notwithstanding."

The parson led the way to a cunningly contrived ladder, which stretched from the base of the cliff to the top, and the bottom of which was hidden in a clump of fern-like vegetation. "There is another road," he remarked, "but it leads round from the Palmer River. No one is supposed to know this way but the members of the camp." By the time he had finished speaking the horses had been unsaddled and the packs removed, and while the parson and Dirty Sam made their goods safe for the night by covering them with the saddle cloths, their comrades hobbled the steeds and placed bells on their necks. Then, following the parson, who carried Nigger, they began to scale the ladder, reaching the top just as the sun dropped behind the range in which was the wonderful cave. A large camp burst upon their gaze at once.

There were one or two partly rough-hewn wood and galvanised iron erections, several bark huts and bough shades, and about a score of tents of various sizes. Near one of the most imposing erections a cooking galley had been built of ant beds, and round it, with pipes in their mouths, were grouped about thirty men. They were all typical north country prospectors. Some had full beards, and some only sported moustaches, but all had the sun-baked, wrinkled features so characteristic of the people of the country, and which rendered it almost impossible to guess their ages. Still, they were all comparatively young men, health and strength showing in every line of their figures.

Tom thought they looked very like the men of Caledonia Camp, and wondered if his uncle were among the group round the cooking-galley. But he was allowed little time for conjecture. The men suddenly perceived the visitors, and even in the fast-falling light recognised them.

"It's the boss!" cried one, rushing forward; "an', by the pigtail I haven't grown, O'Flannigan is with him."

"And old Hard-swearing Dave," cried another; "and Dirty Sam."

The newcomers were now surrounded, and during the next ten minutes were forced to submit to a welcome more vigorous than many a rough-and-tumble fight. In this period every one talked at once, completely indifferent to the fact that their words could not be heard, and that a battle royal between two dogs was being fought beside them.

At length the parson managed to make his voice heard above the babel of sound. "We're hungry, boys," he cried.

"And tucker is just ready," answered one. "But say, boss, who is the youngster?"

"A friend of mine who has made a discovery by which all you fellows will profit considerably. He is looking for a lost uncle. Do any of you happen to know anything about Tom Willoughby?"

"Every man in the Gulf country has heard of him," several men answered simultaneously, and one added, "He was the fellow who led the big wolfram rush, and dozens more."

"And who first struck the gold at Gamboola, the silver-lead of Mount Atherton, and the copper round the Walsh country," another cried.

"And who told all his mates before he pegged out an inch of ground for himself," put in the first speaker. "Tom Willoughby was white right through, and I'll knock sparks out of any man who says he wasn't."

But all had gone to help the cook. They wouldn't have disagreed with Dick Ford in any case.

"Did you know him personally, Dick?" the parson asked, in a peculiar voice.

"I did, long ago, before he went out on the west track. They old boys—of which he was one—are all scattered now, and I never heard of him again until Long Tom, who is now down somewhere near Murgooona, told me, the last time I saw him, that he was certain that he had come back and had gone to live with the Chinese."

"My uncle among the Chinese?" gasped Tom.

"Yes; but Tom Willoughby was no fool, and I wouldn't mind betting there is more lying behind his living with them than any one knows—that is, if Long Tom was right."

"Would you know him if you saw him, Dick?" Again Tom thought the parson's voice was strange.

"You just bet I would," replied Dick. "You never saw him, lad? No? Well, he was a man of about

the boss's build and size, only he had a full, black beard, and could talk Chinese, nigger, and every other language. He was a marvel in other ways, too. I saw him knock out three men once in a stand-up fight. He was easily the best man with his fists I ever saw."

"Tucker is waiting," a man came forward and announced, and the question of tucker being more important to hungry miners than anything else, the conversation ceased abruptly.

That meal was prolonged far into the night. All had so much to say, and all had to inquire about so many friends. Some of the men had taken part in expeditions and adventures in which Dirty Sam had been a prominent figure; some had been in the party with which Mike had been associated; and all knew Dave, and were greatly surprised at the change in his style of language.

Tom was sorely disappointed at not finding his uncle among the men; but he listened with great pleasure to tales of his exploits as related to him by Dick Ford, who had devoted himself almost entirely to Tom during the evening.

"Boys," spoke the parson, after all stories had been exchanged, "I am going to have a look round the old place. I know the way about, and I want some exercise."

"All right, boss," said Dick, who seemed to be a sort of leader in the camp. "But watch you don't get in among the dumps of that black mullock we've stacked."

"Those dumps, Dick, carry about five hundred ounces of silver to the ton, so you will have to cease calling the stuff mullock. But it is Tom's discovery; he can tell you all about it."

"What!" roared the men. "Silver in that stuff

we've thrown away?" Their astonishment was great, but they knew that their "boss" never said anything without good reason for his words.

"We've got about six or seven hundred tons of it lying around now," said one man, "and none of the shows we are working have any appearance of fizzling out yet. We can blow out ten tons a day easily."

"And if the Chinamen continue to leave us alone we'll make our fortune soon," the parson added. Then going over to Tom he said in his ear: "Don't worry about your uncle. I know where he is, and very soon you will meet him." Next moment he had gone, and the men went on with their conversations, now greatly excited with the knowledge that the refuse thrown away, after the ore had been treated for gold, carried such an amount of silver.

But finally the desire to know more about people than to discuss prospects of wealth drove the matter temporarily from their minds, and many were the inquiries for Hungry Ted, Bullocky Bill, Tommy the Kangaroo, Ginger Bob, and Peter the Poet. Suddenly Tom became interested in the general conversation, and for the moment he ceased questioning Dick about his uncle.

"Yes, we heard Chillagoe Charlie was collared," some one was saying. "But we didn't pay much heed to the yarn. Charlie is too slippery for any one to hold, and I'll bet a plug of tobacco that he'll be back among the Closed Fist gang before long."

"What is the Closed Fist gang?" Dirty Sam asked. "This part of the world seems to be crowded with gangs, secret camps, Chinese, and other things equally bad."

"The Closed Fist gang is the name of a band of Chinese who discovered a rich pocket of gold or

something else not very far from here," explained the man who had commented on the amount of ore at the camp's disposal. "Their leader is a fellow who got his pigtail cut off somehow and he wears a mask. They have never troubled us in the slightest, and we think they are half decent fellows."

"Do you mean that Chillagoe Charlie is a Chinaman?" cried Mike in amazement. The very idea seemed preposterous.

"It looks like that, anyhow; he is the boss of that gang——"

"Three blind mice!" ejaculated Dave.

"Where?" cried the men, looking round.

"Not anywhere, you fools!" answered Dave. "Can't ye see I'm relievin' my feelings with a hymn? I was going to say to Tom that it was just as well he didn't sing out to Charlie when he saw him last night."

"Who saw Charlie last night?" asked Dick Ford. "I thought he had been captured?" Dick had not been listening to the earlier conversation on the subject.

"Then he has escaped again," said Tom; "for last night I got into the heart of the mountain where evidently the Closed Fist people have their home, and I saw Chillagoe Charlie among them."

"You got in among the Closed Fists?" cried the men incredulously.

"He did," said Dirty Sam, "and brought back enough stores to last our party a week, as well as samples of the ore they were working."

"Great Australia!" gasped Dick. "Boy, you have been where none of us would dream of going even if we knew where it was. You are just like your uncle——"

"Do none of you know where their place is?" asked Tom.

"No ; one of our mates, Always Ill Joe, thought he had found out, but we reckon the Chinese must have heard of his yarn. Anyhow we got him down in the big gully one morning with a piece of cotton twisted round his neck. He was as dead as that tree over there——"

"Had he a booklet on patent medicines?" Tom asked with a shudder.

"Yes ; how did you know?" cried some of the men in surprise.

"He was always reading some kind of advertisement about the value of somebody's pills," said Dick sorrowfully. "Poor Always Ill Joe. He's gone where he'll not need medicines of any kind——"

"And it was the Chinese gave him his ticket," put in one of the men.

"Yes," said Tom, fumbling in his pocket and producing the book Dave had appropriated. "And he *had* found out where the place was, for it was this book which gave me the directions——"

"That is the book he always carried," cried a man. "Where did you get it?"

"Dave found it in the Chinese township over the big dividing range."

"A life in an ocean grave ! I've been looking for that book everywhere," interrupted Dave. "It had some hymns I never knew before."

Tom silently passed the book over to Dave, and the men clustered round to look at the relic of their unfortunate comrade. Any doubt as to whether his death was due to the Chinese or not was now removed by the knowledge that his treasured book had been found in their village, and murmurs of indignation against the yellow invaders arose from all.

"We'll go to that camp of theirs hidden in the

mountain and wipe them out," said a man known among his comrades as Sailor Bill.

"But the people of the village and those of the cave are two different lots," reasoned one named Carbonate Chris. "We have reason to believe the Closed Fists are not bad fellows, and I don't think they had any hand in the affair. Why, was it not them who sent word to us about the big reef, and where to find it?"

"We'll leave the matter for the boss to decide," said Dick. "I wonder where he has gone?"

"Oh, he is all right," Carbonate Chris laughed. "I'll back him against even Chillagoe Charlie if the two met and had to fight it out."

"But they won't fight if they meet," put in Tom; "the parson and he are friends."

"You seem to know a mighty lot about things for a kid," said a man known as The Wallaby. "How do you happen to know anything about that half-caste Chinaman people call Chillagoe Charlie?"

"I have met him several times, and I rode with him through the bush from the Walsh River up to near the Mitchell. He is a gentleman, and is no more a half-caste Chinaman than I am."

"That was the night he was captured," Dirty Sam explained. "Charlie stuck up the troopers in Caledonia Camp, and told Tom his uncle was up here, and they both rode away together."

"But how could he be captured, then?" asked Dick.

"Don't know. Mike and I thought he had doubled back on a fresh horse he had hidden somewhere near where he left Tom, but as the troopers had already proved that every man in camp was Charlie, and every person they had met between camp and

Crocodile Crossing, we came round to believe with the parson that they had seen a swagsman passing by and had hobbled him."

"Mike," interrupted Dave, "you're not forgetting our little secret, are you?"

"No, Dave; we'll share that thousand pounds the first chance we get."

"What thousand pounds, Mike?" asked one of the men. "I didn't know you could raise that amount?"

"Oh yes, Dave and I can raise that easily," Mike laughed strangely. "But we'll need a lot more than that before we can afford to leave the Gulf country to the Chinamen."

And so the talk went on, changing with delightful abruptness from subject to subject; from the story of how the parson had formed the present camp from the remnants of several other disbanded parties of prospectors, to tales of New Guinean gold rushes. Then Chillagoe Charlie would get a share of attention, and then some old comrades. After that the many stories current about the great prospector, Tom Willoughby, would be told, and then the Chinese would form the subject of discussion. Tom heard the narrative of how some of the men present, including Mike, had worked a rich deposit right in among the Chinese, disguised as aborigines. These natives were still numerous in the Gulf country, it seemed, and both white and yellow men strove to enlist them as friends. Thus the disguised white men were allowed to work out their 'find' in peace, the hateful Chinamen apparently never suspecting that their neighbours were other than a few harmless natives, and were careful to leave them alone.

The men sat round a long table inside an erection

open on every side to the air. A couple of lanterns swung from the bark roof, and lit up the scene with peculiar effect. Outside, in the cooking galley, Nigger and the camp dogs slept together as peacefully as though there never had been any trouble between them. They knew who was master now, and Nigger did not mind the price he had paid in skin and hair in securing that position.

Meanwhile the hands on the dial of the little American clock hanging on a nail inside the dining shade crawled round to twelve; but the parson was still absent.

Dick rose to his feet and stretched himself. "It's getting late, boys," he said, "and I think we'd better turn in. You new fellows can have that place over by the forge amongst you. That is the visitors' camp. I'll wait up for the boss; he has a place of his own here, but maybe it needs something done to it."

"This will be the first night's sleep we have had since leaving Caledonia Camp," said Dirty Sam, "in which we were not in danger from either aborigines or the Chinese."

"I don't think there is really any danger here," Dick responded. "But I can't say I feel too happy over the way things are looking. To put it straight, matters are mighty suspicious-like. We haven't seen a nigger for over a fortnight, and they used to come round the camp for tucker every day. As for yellowskins, we never see them at all now, and when a Chow is quiet you may be sure his cunning brain is working out some idea that doesn't mean good to any one but himself."

"They tried a game on us when coming up," said Dirty Sam; "the biggest crowd of niggers I ever saw tried to surround us, and the parson saw a lot

of Chinamen among them. We got through all right though, but only to-day we had a kind of fight with about a dozen Chinese—— Good-night, boys——”

A loud bark from Nigger startled all, and then the other dogs joined in with the chorus. Next moment the thunder of hoofs was heard coming down the track, and while the men wondered among themselves who could be travelling that way at midnight, a rider drew up just outside the reach of the firelight. “You are being surrounded by aborigines from the south and Chinese from the north,” he cried; “I have just come through the Chinese lines, and overheard the plot.”

“Come in and have a drink of tea,” Dick cried, flashing a lantern in the direction of the visitor. “We are much obliged for your warning.”

“No, thanks,” replied the stranger, setting spurs to his steed. “Some other time.” As he turned the light fell upon his face; it was masked.

“Chillagoe Charlie!” exclaimed the men.

The sound of galloping hoof-beats receding down the track was their only answer.

“I wish the boss would turn up,” spoke Dick anxiously, some time after, as the men held a council of war. “He is the man to know what to do.”

“What is the matter, boys? I thought you would all have turned in long ago,” a voice cried from the darkness, and the parson walked up to the fire.

CHAPTER XIV

WHITE, BLACK, AND YELLOW

"**Y**OU don't seem a bit surprised, boss?" The speaker was Dick Ford, and the parson had just been told about their visitor, and his warning concerning the intentions of both aborigines and the Chinese.

"No, Dick, I knew this was coming," the parson replied. "In fact, it was to find out their plans exactly that I left you to-night. I understand Chinese, you know——"

"What! Were you among the Chinese to-night?" cried the men, as they realised the import of his words.

"I was in a big Chinese encampment not much more than a mile from here. It is completely hidden at the head of one of the gullies which slopes to the Palmer, and there are over two hundred men in it."

"Great gum suckers!" ejaculated Dick Ford; "I never dreamt that their hidden city was so near."

"And it isn't," said the parson. "The encampment is not their city. I have been in that place too, but not to-night. It lies over among the lime bluffs at the north end of the dividing range."

"An' what are they doin' with so many cities an'

camps?" Dave asked. "Wouldn't they be better to be all together in one place?"

"I thought you knew the Chinese better than that, Dave," put in Dirty Sam. "They must spread over the country as much as they can to draw attention away from their secret city. They know that the prospectors will not attack them in force, and feel they are quite safe in small parties anywhere. The might of the great Australian Commonwealth protects them, for you may be sure every Chinaman you see above ground has paid his poll-tax. In this city, however, you may be equally sure that none have paid anything to the Government exchequer."

"You are right, Sam," the parson said. "Their city is underground, and is populated by men who never show face above ground during the daytime. There are some marvellously rich gold formations around it, and the people work them on communistic principles. It is the duty of every registered Chinaman to do anything and everything to prevent that city from being discovered, and all villages, encampments, or working parties in evidence anywhere are but decoys."

"Then why should we worry about this encampment you have seen near us?" asked Sailor Bill. "If it is just another decoy we need not trouble——"

"But it is not meant to be seen. It is too well hidden, and that is what gives its nature away. There is no use my telling you how I found it out just now; sufficient to say that in that almost closed gully lies every Chinaman that could be spared from the city, and also as many as possible of those scattered parties as could be taken without causing the chance prospector to wonder why the gold-washing Chinaman had grown so scarce. But this is their idea: The

white man must be exterminated up here. They could easily bring about that end themselves, for, for every white prospector there are a dozen Chinamen in the country, and wherever they find one or two men among the mountains alone, as we all know, they do not hesitate to make away with them. But we are a big party ; as a matter of fact, since the early Palmer rush, when the Chinese flooded the land, and assisted nature to drive out the white man, no party of anything like our strength has been here. They, being extremely prudent people, therefore wish to take precautions against the consequences, should by any possibility some of us escape. Whoever did get away, of course, would tell of the massacre and raise the feeling against the Chinese to such a point that the Government would speedily send up an army of special duty troopers to drive them down into the Gulf. So they have arranged with the aborigines to attack us, and the story that will go forth will bring down punishment on these poor creatures, and doubtless many of the gold-washing Chinese parties will tell how they witnessed the fight, but could not help us."

"You talk like a mighty good story-book, boss," Dick Ford said ; "but don't you think that we could give the aborigines more than we got from them ?"

"Certainly, Dick ; but it won't be aborigines who will give us trouble ; it will be that encampment of Chinamen, stripped, and painted to look like aborigines."

"The same dodge as they already tried on us coming up ?" Mike asked.

"Exactly ; only this time they know we are here, and they intend to make sure work. As I said, I was in among them to-night and heard their plans."

"Oh, that will be joyful! Did you see Chillagoe Charlie among them?" asked Dave.

"No, I didn't see him," the parson responded.

"It are mighty curious how he should give his own people away," muttered one of the men. "Of course, them half-castes are never true to their own kind."

"Do you think that Chillagoe Charlie is a half-caste?" the parson asked curiously.

"Well, the boys talked the thing over to-night, and it seems as if there is nothing else he could be."

The parson laughed as if he had just heard the best joke ever uttered.

"You've solved the problem of getting rid of the Chinese," he said. "Just you write down to the trooper superintendent at Murgoona and tell him that Chillagoe Charlie is a Chinaman, and he'll come up with his men and arrest every Chinaman in the country."

"The cottage was a hashed one!" roared Dave, almost choking with laughter as the memory of the superintendent's exploits came back to him; "but that's the best idea struck to-night."

Mike, Sam, and Tom were also tickled immensely at the parson's suggestion, and laughed so heartily that the men of the camp who did not know the cause of the merriment began to think they had taken leave of their senses.

Finally Sailor Bill put a piece of rope into Dave's palm, and that individual, thinking he had grasped a snake, stopped so suddenly that it was some seconds before he could give vent to his disgust in appropriate language. While he was expressing himself the others moved a little bit away, and began to discuss their plan of action.

"You don't mean to take this thing lying down, boss, do you?" Dick Ford asked.

"Not exactly ; but we're not going to give them the satisfaction of fighting them."

"What else can we do, sir ?" Tom inquired. "Surely we're not going to run away—— ?"

"No, Tom ; there are two reasons why we won't run away. One is that we are surrounded now, and the other is that our horses have been stolen."

"What ! The camp horses stolen ?" gasped Dick. "By smoke ! this is more serious than it looked."

"Have our horses been taken ?" Mike asked anxiously.

"Well, I saw about fifty being driven into a yard behind their camp, and I recognised my own, Tom's—by the way, you didn't notice what kind of horse your visitor was riding to-night, I suppose ? No ? It doesn't matter any way—a lot of this camp's horses, and some I didn't know."

"By Jupiter ! parson, I'm not going to sit down and allow some dirty Chinamen to keep my horse," Mike exclaimed ; "I'll fight the beggars myself first."

"I'm with you, Mike," said Sam quietly. "My horse was Mr. Hornsby's bay, and I could never look him in the face again if I had lost it."

"And I'm going with you," cried Tom. "Chillagoe Charlie gave me mine, and I am going to keep it in remembrance of him."

"I reckon we're all going for those horses," put in Dick Ford very quietly. "It's all very good lying low when it's only danger to ourselves that's threatened, but when it comes to allowing our horses to be stolen by a mob of Chinamen I reckon we've got to take a hand in the game right suddenly."

"Hear ! hear !" yelled all. "That's the ticket exactly."

"Onward, Christian soldiers!" roared Dave. "Let's start now before they begin to go through our packs."

"They haven't got our packs, Dave," the parson said; "but all the same we're going to start now, although not on such a hopeless and foolish mission as to try to regain our horses. Even although we had them we couldn't use them unless we meant to break through the lines somewhere, and leave all our property to John Chinamen."

"Then what's your plan, boss?" Dick asked; "I for one won't desert our camp alive."

"Nor me! Nor me! Nor me!" shouted the men one after the other, and Dave to clinch matters added, "Nor will I, although I am killed deader than ten Chinkies. God save the King!" The men laughed at the fervour of Dave's language, and then turned to the parson again.

"Your plan, boss?" repeated Dick, testing the sharpness of his sheath-knife with his finger.

"My plan," answered the parson, "means neither to fight nor to run away, but simply to upset their plans."

"Very good, boss; how are we to do that?" Dick continued; "the Chinese are up to every game we could play in stratagem."

"I don't know about that; and even although they do see through our scheme, they may not be able to help themselves."

"Tell us, parson, or I'll have to sing a whole hymn," entreated Dave, and to the relief of every one who knew Dave's vocal powers the parson began: "My plan is not complete in detail, but I'll give you the idea and then we can all elaborate it until it is perfect. Briefly it is this. There are two distinct forces against us, and my idea is to turn them against each other."

"A hundred fathoms deep in a copper mine! But isn't the parson a powerful thinker?" cried Dave in great delight; "I knew he would strike on a bosker plan."

"How are we going to do it?" Dick asked thoughtfully. Already his mind and that of all the others had seized on the idea.

"Well, I overheard to-night that the Chinese don't mean to force matters until the night of some corroborree the natives mean to hold. They will supply them with opium for that ceremony, which, they know, will drive the natives furiously mad. Then mixing with them they'll rush us and complete the business. But as they won't give the opium until the time appointed, for fear of the natives becoming unreasonable too soon, and as the first corroborree that is held among Gulf natives is the new moon ceremony, we need not fear an attack until very late to-morrow night. Now, by starting at once, we can precipitate matters, and that is what I purpose doing. It is only one o'clock in the morning, so we have yet five hours of darkness, and during that time we must go to the aborigines' camp and do some damage there which we must make certain they will attribute to the Chinese. Then we must visit the Chinese quarters and cause them to think the aborigines have broken faith, and raided them. Each party will then proceed to take revenge upon the other, and probably we will be quite able to deal with the victorious remnant."

"You mean," said Dirty Sam, "the Chinese and the aborigines will fight each other and we'll hold the stakes."

"Exactly; and now let us arrange the details, if the scheme meets with general approval——?"

"You bet it does, boss," cried the men.

"We understand," said Dick Ford. "We'll creep up in the dark and steal all the weapons we can get our hands on from the aborigines, and perhaps carry away their chief. We'll tie bags round our feet there, and leave very plain Chinese tracks right round the bottom of the gullies to the Chinese. Then we'll go for the Chinese with the stolen spears and boomerangs, and, if we can, steal their joss, and make naked foot tracks round another way to the aborigines. It means a lot of tramping, but the exercise will be good for us."

"And the fun we'll get to-morrow will pay us well for our work," laughed Carbonate Chris.

"Long may it rain!" cried Dave. "Let us turn Chinese at once and have less talkee-talkee."

"Shouldn't we divide ourselves into two parties?" suggested Mike. "It would be much easier for a smaller band to creep up undetected, and we're not going to fight in any case."

"Perhaps you are right, Mike," the parson agreed. "We can do the business much faster if we form two parties."

"Then pick us out, boss," cried Sailor Bob. "I am all-fired to know whether I am to be a Chow or a nigger."

"You are to be in the party which will call on the Chinese," the parson said. "We may be the better of your skill in the handling of ropes. Men, some of you know the ways of the aborigines well, and some of you have had experience of the manners of the Chinese. Sort yourselves out into two groups, therefore, and set about your tasks. I needn't tell you how best to aggravate your respective people, for some of you fellows know as much about them as I do. Do

them no bodily harm, whatever happens, but act so as to make them very angry."

"All right, parson," said Mike. "Here are two bands of raiders for you. Which are you leading yourself?"

"The Chinese section. My knowledge of one or two things about them may be useful. Dick, you know the natives well, you know your work. You will find them camped two miles south from here just where the main gully opens on the big plain."

"I know the place, boss," answered Dick. "Come on, lads."

"And you other fellows come with me," continued the parson, "and bring all the ropes you can get your hands on."

The lights of the camp were left burning as a guide for the men when returning, and the two parties, after seeing that their revolvers were in working order, set off on their missions, one going north, the other south.

Tom, Dirty Sam, Sailor Bill and a dozen others were in the parson's party, to which Nigger, suddenly waking, also attached himself. Half an hour's careful travelling over ridges and gullies brought them to a spot where the ground fell away in front in a sheer wall of rock. It was so dark that they might easily have walked over the precipice, but the parson, ever observant, stopped in time.

"This is the edge of the crater of an extinct volcano," he said, "and the encampment is down below. The only passage out is on the other side, and doubtless it is guarded. Make those ropes fast on top and drop the free ends over. Loop the lower end so that a man can put his foot in it for being hauled up.

"Let me go down first, Cap.," said Sailor Bill. "I can shin a rope better than a monkey, and I can see how the land lies and report."

"All right, Bill; but we're not all going down in any case. Most of us must stay on top to pull up what we may appropriate."

Sailor Bill grasped the rope and slid over the cliff without a sound, and all on top waited anxiously for developments. Soon the rope ceased shaking, and Dirty Sam, taking it in his hand, felt that the strain was off.

"He is down," he whispered. "Get ready to haul him up, boys."

"I hope he is not behaving foolishly," the parson said. "He can do nothing down there alone——"

A tug at the rope while he spoke, and immediately the men began to haul up.

"Jupiter! parson," Sam exclaimed, "I doubt Bill has fainted, the rope is swinging as if there were some dead body upon it." The men pulled quickly. No one spoke, a horrible fear had entered into their minds. Well they knew the cunning of the yellow-man, and that his ways were dark and strange. The parson grasped the swaying body as it appeared, and pulled it over the ledge. The loop of the rope had been placed under the armpits, but the figure which had come up lay as if dead.

"Poor Bill!" murmured one; "the beggars must have been waiting and knifed him——"

"Howling centipedes!" gasped a man. "This isn't Bill. It's a Chinaman!"

"And he's dead," said another, bending over the man.

"No, only drugged," the parson put in. "Lower the rope again. I am going down. Where's Tom?"

But Tom was not among the men. As a matter of fact he had been down at the bottom as soon as Sailor Bill. Nigger had begun sniffing at the ground, and

following the wise dog. Tom had been led down a well-worn footpath which zig-zagged to the foot of the rock. He saw Sailor Bill placing his burden in the sling and approached cautiously.

"Bill," he whispered as the inert Chinaman began to rise to the top. For answer Bill flung himself upon him and bore him to the ground. "You blamed pig-tailed Chow——" he was saying as he lay on the top of his victim, when Nigger flew at him savagely, but without uttering a sound. He removed his grip from Tom's throat to attend to the dog, and taking advantage of the diversion Tom wriggled free.

"Come off, Nigger," he said in low tones ; "that's a friend. Don't hurt the dog, Bill—it's Nigger."

Nigger opened his mouth, and set free Bill's left ear, and Bill at the same time ceased applying the pressure of his two hands to the dog's neck.

"How in thunder did you come here?" he muttered, rising to his feet ; "I might have killed you."

"I found a road down ; but where are the Chinese ?"

"Lying in a circle over there, dead drunk. Come on and we'll look for their joss." Running out into the open they almost fell over the body of a sleeping Chinaman, one of a ring composed of several hundreds.

"You hunt around for Mr. Joss while I see if I can find anything of value on their carcasses," continued Sailor Bill. "Ah, they've all got big ugly knives. I fancy they'll miss most of them when they awake."

Tom meanwhile had perceived the form of a large squatting idol in the middle of the circle, and he ran up to it. To his surprise, until he remembered that most josses were hollow, it was quite light, and getting



"BILL FLUNG HIMSELF UPON HIM AND BORE HIM TO THE GROUND."

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it upon his shoulders he made his way back to the hanging rope. There he found Dirty Sam just coming off. "Give me a hand, Sam," he said; "I want to send this fellow aloft."

"And you had better get up yourself at once," Sam replied. "The parson is almost mad about you."

"Tom, you reckless boy," spoke the parson's voice at that moment, as he slid down the rope. "Why will you do these things?"

"I couldn't help it, sir, and I want to be of some use."

"Very well; come with me to where this crater's walls break into the gully. We must stampede the horses to make these people think the aborigines did that to cover up their tracks.

"But won't they find our tracks up on top?"

"I don't think so; it is a great native dodge making horses break away to cover tracks, and the men are carrying everything round to the other side, to give point to that suspicion. The Chinese will find little things dropped here and there all down the gully which will lead them to the camp of the aborigines."

"But the bed of the gully is so hard that no tracks can be left."

"None of a barefooted native, Tom, but plenty of a steel-shod horse. That fact enables us to set them off now, and walk along after them instead of ahead of them— Ah! there are the sentries, asleep too, each man dreaming probably of returning to China with enough money to set up a joss of his own. If Dave were here he could not resist the temptation to cut off their pigtails, I am sure."

"What are they drugged with, sir?"

"Opium. No Chinamen can resist that; Chillagoe Charlie gave them a big supply to-night."

"I wonder what connection that person can have with the Chinese?"

"Oh, we'll know some day, I suppose; but don't you feel a little bit afraid, Tom, standing among so many people whom we have just robbed?"

"Oh no; I see our horses over there, and I know we could get to them before the Chinamen, should they awake."

"Well, we are going to use them now; all the boys should be down by this time. Ah, is that you, Bill? You seem to have a fair amount of general cargo on board."

"Still room in the forward main hatch, Cap. What are the orders?"

"Gather your comrades and go off down this gully, dropping things occasionally to show which way you've gone. Catch one of the horses and mount the joss upon it anyway you can. See that you keep clear of the tracks the other party are making, and get over to the aborigines' camp. Sam knows what to do there. Now, Tom, for a piece of bareback riding——"

The parson emitted a low whistle and at once his own horse and Tom's came running up. "Knock down these rails closing in the gully," the parson then said to some of the men, "and we'll drive the animals off. Don't depend on seeing us at the native camp, for we are going to cut the tracks of Ford's men now."

"We know what to do," Dirty Sam answered, and next minute the parson and Tom rode off, driving the other horses in front of them.

"We'll put them in a safe place, boys, so don't try to get your own just now or you will ruin everything," he cried, as they rode past and the men answered that they understood.

Ten minutes later the two riders had driven the

horses into another gully, where the presence of good grass would detain the horses better than a fence round them, and then riding up one gully and down another in a manner bewildering to Tom, who did not know where he was, they suddenly climbed a ridge and looked down on the Chinese from the point where their rope was still hanging. The sleeping Chinaman was still lying where he had been left.

"Oh, I forgot Nigger," cried Tom, as they lowered him down again.

"Oh, poor Nigger ! I forgot him too, we'll have to go back for him," said the parson, but when they had hauled up the rope and were ready to depart Nigger was beside them, his long tongue hanging out of his mouth, and his eyes gazing reproachfully at his master.

"It was a mistake, Nigger," the parson said ; "but I don't think I could have carried you bareback in any case."

They rode slowly to camp, whence, procuring saddles, and ordering Nigger to stay behind, they then set out to cut the tracks of those who had been visiting the natives. They met them about a mile away, circling round by the east. They were carrying loads of spears, boomerangs, shields, waddies, and an heterogeneous collection of other native gear. They were also carrying a man.

"We had no trouble," Dick Ford said ; "they were all asleep and we took away every weapon we could find, and also their chief. He must have been taking pidcherie, though, for he hasn't awoke yet."

"I have reason to believe Chillagoe Charlie visited them to-night, and gave them the opium the Chinese promised them," the parson answered ; "but two of you take him over to camp. Tom can lead you to the

Chinese. I am going after the other boys now. Don't wait any longer than is required to throw your spears and other things among them. Be careful you don't hurt any one, and break the points of the spears so that they can't be used again." He rode off, and under Tom's guidance the party proceeded.

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An hour afterwards they were back in camp, and shortly before sunrise the other division returned safely also.

"Well, Sam," said Mike, "if you boys have done your work as well as we have done ours we needn't care whether the scheme works any further or not. We have taken away all the weapons and their chief."

"And we have left the Chinese joss in his place," Sam laughed.

"And you can keel haul me if there is a knife left among the Chinese," said Sailor Bill.

"We can now await developments with the knowledge that we have removed the stings from both Chinese and aborigines," the parson added.

"For which—God save the King!—I say Chillagoe Charlie deserves us to stand up for his being a real decent fellow," Dave remarked. And all agreed.

The men did not go out to work that day. Instead they took turns and slept, for they knew that all their powers of endurance might be called upon when night again fell. The parson, however, seemed to require no rest; all day he moved about among the gullies and ridges, and late in the afternoon he came into camp and informed the men that their ruse had worked so far, for he had seen Chinese spies in the vicinity of the native camp, and had also caught sight of some

aborigines looking down over the rocks at the Chinese encampment.

"They will let everything else go to avenge the insult to their joss," the parson said; "so we are likely to be spectators to-night instead of victims."

"And the aborigines will be blind to everything but that their chief has been captured and the yellow-man's idol left in his sacred place," Dick Ford laughed.

"I wouldn't miss seeing the circus for a good lot," Carbonate Chris said; "I wonder where it will come off?"

"I'll bet Chillagoe Charlie could tell," observed Dave sagely; "he is a handy man for having about a camp."

"I can tell you myself," the parson said with a laugh; "the fight, if we can call it such, will take place at the bottom of the gully nearest us about nine o'clock to-night."

"Who told you, boss? Were you asking them?" inquired one of the men.

"No; but I have calculated the spot where two armies would meet, marching towards each other by the shortest route, allowing, of course, for the different styles of travelling characteristic of our friends. The natives will leave their camp after going through their new moon ceremony, which will begin an hour after sundown and last one hour. The next hour will see them at the spot I have indicated. The Chinese will be there at nine, because it will take them three hours praying to an improvised joss, after sundown, to get their feelings worked up to a frenzied point; then they will come with a rush."

"You've got it all time-tabled nicely, parson," Mike said; "who is going to win?"

"I'll bet on the niggers," cried Sailor Bill.

"And, Germany for ever ! I'll back the Chinkies," roared Dave.

"Ye couldn't fight it out now, I suppose, just to see ?" suggested a sportively inclined miner.

"Of course we could," Dave replied ; "what do you say, Sailor ?"

"I don't mind," came the answer promptly ; "and Sailor assumed an aggressive attitude.

But the parson at once interfered. "None of this nonsense, boys," he said ; "it is more than possible that you may get all the fighting you want before morning, and the other side will be neither black nor yellow."

"Jupiter ! parson," exclaimed Dirty Sam ; "what do you mean ?"

"I mean that if certain things take a certain line of development you may be called out to fight for Mr. Hornsby. I have learned to-day, from the aborigines, that he was recently arrested on suspicion of being Chillagoe Charlie ; he escaped soon after, and is now on his way north here, pursued by a company of troopers."

"Poor old Joe ! Is that mad trooper boss coming up here, parson ?" Dave cried.

"He is, I believe ; and if he remains obstinate in his ideas regarding Mr. Hornsby after I have seen him, I am afraid there will be serious trouble."

"You bet there will," murmured the men ; but the cook for that day announcing just then that tea was ready, an end was put to the discussion, and during the meal the sun went down.

The chief of the aborigines had now recovered from the effects of his induced sleep, and seemingly was well pleased to find himself in the hands of the white people. "My word !" he remarked, as one of the

men handed him a tin of preserved meat and a pannikin of tea ; "you white fellows jolly lucky have me here. Black fellows come along to-night an' wipe you out if King Billy with them."

"But they won't come now, King Billy," said Dirty Sam ; "we would have to kill you if they did."

King Billy's eyes rolled. "My word !" he gasped ; "What you kill me for ? King Billy no' want come wipe you fellows out. Him friend with fellow with black face who come off, name Chillagoe Charlie. He say to King Billy if black fellows no' come wipe out white fellows, he give plenty of 'bacca and tucker."

"But you intended coming all the same, King Billy ?" the parson said.

"Oh, King Bill don't know 'bout that. Yellow fellows who say muchy-muchy, an' eaty ricy, tell black fellows they give plenty 'bacca too if black fellows go for white fellows, but King Billy no sure 'bout them, they plenty good liars. But black fellows no do nothing King Billy no' with them. Hims like some plenty more tinned dog. Hims like it strong too."

"All right, King ; here's another tin for you. It's gone bad anyhow and we can't use it ourselves," laughed the cook ; "watch that little black dog doesn't take it from you, though." Nigger was sniffing around the black king very suspiciously, but getting a whiff of the contents of Billy's new tin he hurriedly ran out into the fresh air.

"Hurry up, boys," cried the cook ; "don't be all night at supper. I want to get a seat in the dress-circle to-night, and the dishes have to be washed after you're done."

"We'll give you a hand washing up, Bob," said Dirty Sam ; "give me some more tea just now."

"By smoke ! boys, I hear some one coming off the

ladder, cried Carbonate Chris; "maybe its Chillagoe Charlie." The men sprang to their feet and gazed towards the top of their ladderway; a figure was walking across the space intervening, and next moment it came within the zone of the lamplight.

"No, it's not Chillagoe Charlie," a well-known voice spoke; "although some friends of mine insist on thrusting that honour upon me."

"It's Mr. Hornsby!" cried the men in chorus, running to meet him.

"Yes, you've struck the mark first shot, boys; I believe that is my name. I hope I am not too late to get something to eat? I can assure you I have travelled fast enough——"

He threw himself into the nearest seat; it was evident he was very much exhausted.

"Rocked in the cradle of the Australian bight!" roared Dave; "what has ye done with the trooper fellows, boss?"

"Lost them somewhere about the Mitchell River, Dave; why do you ask?"

"Oh, we know the whole story, the parson got a wireless message from somewhere telling him everything," Dave answered, making a place for his late chief at the end of the table.

"Thanks, Dave," said Mr. Hornsby, taking the seat prepared for him; "oh, by the way, some of you boys might see if you can rake up a feed for my mare. She's badly needing one; I left her at the bottom of the ladder. You see, the new manager came, and I—well—I wanted to exercise my horse a bit, so I came up here. If you happen to be on speaking terms with Chillagoe Charlie you might give him the hint, all the same, that some troopers started to come up after me——"

"We will welcome them on their arrival," the parson

said quietly. "I have an impression that the real Chillagoe Charlie is about tired of all the fuss he is causing, and means to see what charges there really are against him."

"Can he refute them, parson?" asked Mr. Hornsby meaningly; "because if there is any difficulty about that I'll borrow a fresh horse and get on the move again, and draw the troopers and their silly old chief right out of Australia after me. I did not know when I came away that Charlie was up this way, or I wouldn't have come. I thought he would have doubled back before reaching the Mitchell."

"Charlie is up here," said the parson, "and you have done the best thing possible for all concerned in bringing the troopers along——"

"Yes," put in one of the men, "cos we can now kill them all an' blame it on the Chinese and the niggers."

"A good idea, Joe," several men cried in agreement; "we'll play the Chinkies' game."

"If it comes to a question of trouble between our boss and the troopers," Dick Ford said slowly, "I reckon the troopers will have to fight us——"

"Nonsense, Dick," reproved the parson. "There is no trouble. The troopers are very fine fellows; they have simply made a series of mistakes——"

"And ruined some good horses," Mr. Hornsby laughed. "Hullo! I didn't notice that Royalty was present. How do you do, King Billy?"

"Um. Hims don't do not too bad, but you fellows too slow in bringing along 'bacca."

"A mistake, your majesty," said Mike, handing him a plug of a hard black substance, popularly known throughout the Gulf country as "kill at a hundred yards." The Royal one placed the plug in his mouth and bit off a piece, which he forthwith proceeded to

chew, and paid no further attention to his surroundings.

"There is a sort of entertainment on to-night, sir," Dirty Sam informed Mr. Hornsby; "it starts at nine, but there may be a crush, therefore those who wish seats should go early."

"Thanks, Sam, but I'm too tired," Mr. Hornsby answered; "I've been in the saddle for a very long time, and you know I am not like the parson——"

"Sam," said the parson, "take the boys away to see what happens. Mr. Hornsby needs a rest, and I will stay with him."

"I reckon I will stay too," spoke Mike quietly.

"And I," said Dick Ford; "the boys can tell us about the fight afterwards."

"Please put some other man in charge of the theatre-goers, parson," Sam said; "you can't cheat me that way; if trouble is coming I am going to have a hand in it——"

"There is no trouble, Sam——"

"Nevertheless, I intend to stay here, sir, unless you order me to go away."

"All right, Sam, as you please," said the parson. Then turning to the others he warned them against taking any part in the impending fight, and gave directions how they could reach the best point for seeing everything.

Shortly afterwards the men departed, leaving only Mike, Sam, Dick, and Tom in the camp with the parson and Mr. Hornsby.

"Hullo! Tom," said the latter, "I didn't see you before. How did you get here? You left without saying goodbye, if I remember correctly. Have you found your uncle? and where did you part with Charles the Great?"



"AT THE SAME MOMENT A CLOSELY PACKED MOB OF HUMANITY
RUSHED ROUND A CORNER."

[To face page 310.]

Tom was about to answer, but the parson interposed quickly. "Tom has had one or two strange adventures," he said ; " but why are you not away with the others, Tom ? I am surprised at your staying behind."

" I know that you expect something to happen here, sir, and I'm not going to leave the comrades who have been so good to me while there is any prospect of danger coming to them."

" My dear boy," the parson said kindly, " believe me there is absolutely no danger anticipated, and I want you to go with the others. I have a reason for asking you to go."

" Very well, sir," Tom answered ; " come, Nigger." The boy and the dog ran off after the others, and, in due time, were lying with them among some scrub on the hill-slope above the spot where the conflict was expected to take place.

And they were not mistaken as to time or place. " Time's up," one of the men had just said when a great number of skulking forms became discernible through the darkness, approaching the mouth of the gully from the open scrub-covered plains. At the same moment a closely packed mob of humanity rushed round a corner in the gully from the other side. A minute later and both armies had seen each other. Then each stopped its onward progress suddenly, and seemed to be considering the advisability of flight. Each had expected to surprise the other, and had hoped to finish the business in hand, effectually, without much risk to themselves. The aborigines had armed themselves with hastily prepared clubs and spears, and the Chinese carried cords with which, if they had found the natives asleep, they intended strangling them. They had also the broken spears which had been left in their camp, and some portable

josses. What use the idols would be in a fight was not apparent to the onlookers, but doubtless the Chinese had great confidence in their mysterious powers.

"They're mighty slow about starting," one of the spectators remarked; "I reckon we've paid our tickets and are entitled to see something for our money."

"Howling!—I mean—I mean—give us a song, boys," yelled Dave suddenly.

"What in thunder should any one sing for?" demanded Carbonate Chris, who did not understand the nature of Dave's request. Dave forgot to answer, for the Chinese had now begun to make the hills resound with wild, unearthly yells, calculated probably to strike terror to the hearts of the simple natives. The natives, however, could do something in that line too, and they retaliated with even fiercer shouts.

"This is the funniest way of fighting I ever saw," laughed Sailor Bill. "I suppose they think they are frightening each other?"

"I'll give them something more dangerous than yells," said the Wallaby, hurling a stone in among the Chinese. The result was startling. With shrieks, now plainly expressive of terror, the Chinese turned and fled. They had not bargained on being attacked from the air. Their new joss had deceived them, and his days, his hours rather, were now numbered.

The white men laughed till the tears streamed down their tanned faces. The valiant Chinese had not proved very formidable antagonists after all. The aborigines still continued to make night hideous with their discordant shouts, but suddenly discovering that their opponents had fled, they stopped and began to sing a song of triumph. But this weird wail also ceased abruptly, and picking up the weapons which

they had thrown down while singing they ran at head-long speed *back the way they had come*.

"Hullo!" exclaimed some one, "that is surely a new way of following up a retreating foe. When I was in the South African picnic we always went after the Boers like blazes when we got them on the run——"

"I hear riders coming from the south-west," cried Tom; "the natives have heard them also, and that is why they are running away."

"From Ireland's soda fountains!" roared Dave; "if ye had given me a song when I asked ye I could have told ye the troopers were coming then; I know the step of troopers' horses too well——"

"Troopers!" cried the men; "we'd better see what they want here!"

"Boys, remember what the boss said," Carbonate Chris warned; "be civil to them until we see what the trouble is. Hullo! where's the boy?"

"I expect he has gone to report to the skipper that suspicious craft are coming up from the starboard," Sailor Bill gave as his opinion.

And he was right. Even then Tom and Nigger were running towards the camp with the news of the latest developments. Instinctively Tom felt that momentous events were about to happen, and he wanted to be near the parson and Mr. Hornsby. He did not slacken speed until he rushed into the camp. Mr. Hornsby, the parson, and the other three men were sitting at the table deep in consultation, and King Billy was sleeping in a corner. "The troopers are coming!" Tom cried; "they'll be here in a few minutes."

"Dear me, Tom, how excited you are!" the parson said gently; "honest men do not need to fear the troopers. We'll do our best to entertain them." He

shot a meaning glance at Mr. Hornsby and walked out into the darkness, and next moment Tom heard him swinging out on to the ladders which led to the gully beneath.

"Where is he going?" Tom cried, preparing to follow.

"Sit down where you are, Tom," Mr. Hornsby commanded; "this little drama, or burlesque, has reached the last act, and your presence is required on the stage when the curtain falls."

He had barely finished speaking when a clatter of hoofs announced the arrival of the riders, while shouts from behind betokened that the miners were following closely on foot.

"Good evening, Mr. Superintendent," Mr. Hornsby called out pleasantly. "We meet again, it seems. May I compliment you on your skill in following a track——?"

"If compliments are going," the superintendent said, with a laugh, as he came into the lamplight, "may I say that our old friend Dick Turpin on his famous Black Bess would be slow alongside you and your horse? You are the fastest traveller I know."

"That is because you *don't* know Chillagoe Charlie," laughed Mr. Hornsby.

CHAPTER XV

CHILLAGOE CHARLIE REVEALS HIMSELF

"I HAVE hardly the nerve to ask for some tea for my men," said the superintendent; "but the poor fellows are pretty well tired out, and if you would kindly give us some water we would get away a bit and make ourselves as comfortable as is possible in this part of the world."

"My dear Mr. Superintendent," replied Mr. Hornsby, "tell your men to dismount where they are. Even though you fully intend to take me away in irons and other metallic fixtures to-morrow, I'll use my influence to get you and your men a square meal for to-night. I wanted one badly myself an hour ago."

"Here are the boys," cried Mike; "the fight must be over——"

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot! Where is the boss trooper?" shouted Dave, rushing into the camp at the head of the miners.

"Here, Dave," responded the individual for whom he asked; "a merry Christmas to you."

"Boys," said Mr. Hornsby, "you will oblige me greatly if you will do your best to prepare a decent meal for our visitors. They have come far, and can't help being policemen."

"You needn't rub it in so hard," remonstrated the

superintendent, as his men set their weary horses free to feed on anything they could find, and came into the camp ; "even a much-abused policeman has been known to be a half decent fellow——"

"It doesn't matter though you were Chinese," said Dick Ford ; "we are white men here, and the best in our camp is free to any visitor. Fall in, boys, and hustle a feed along——"

"The sea is England's glory ! superintendent ; but——"

"It is, Dave ; but latest reports seem to indicate that Germany is also in the running——"

"Let Germany go to—to the Bay of Biscay !" roared Dave ; "I want to talk to you on a very serious matter." He came over to where the superintendent had found a seat on an upturned box.

"Well, fire away, Dave ; I am too tired to object to anything you say."

"Oh, it aint much—come here, Mike ; I just wanted to say that I am Chillagoe Charlie and you can pay the reward to Mike."

"The reward is withdrawn now, Dave. But I am glad to meet the gentleman I have been hunting for such a time."

"You couldn't screw the reward on again, I suppose ?" asked Dave tentatively.

"I am afraid not ; but tell us how you have come to give yourself up."

"He's stricken with sorrow for his evil deeds," laughed Sailor Bill, "and he wants that thousand pounds."

"That are a fact, boss," said Dave contritely ; "I am tired of leadin' a double life——"

"Dave, stop that nonsense," Mr. Hornsby commanded ; "what would the Caledonia Mines Company

do if their foreman, the only man who knows the various peculiarities of the mines, were to make a prolonged stay down in Brisbane?"

"Howling!—I mean Mary had a little sheep, boss. I wouldn't stay after the reward was paid——"

"Dave, you are a fool," broke in Mike. "I say, Mr. Officer, I suppose your work up here is finished when you have Chillagoe Charlie in your hands?"

"Not quite; but are you another candidate for that honour? I think I credited you with it before?"

"You did, but things have changed since then. I might as well be dead as hunted from camp to camp like an outcast nigger——"

"Mike, old man," Dirty Sam interrupted, "it is very good of you to try to save me from the consequences of my own mad acts, but I can't allow it at all. Superintendent, I am Chillagoe Charlie."

A murmur of astonishment went round all the men who heard Sam's words. He spoke in tones that carried conviction, and seemed greatly distressed over his position.

Mr. Hornsby was smoking a cigarette and gazing at a point in the bark roof very intently. He lowered his eyes on hearing Sam's words, and said in a voice of reproof, "Sam, you are a first-class liar. Give the next man a chance——"

"Oh, if it is Chillagoe Charlie you want," said Dick Ford, "I reckon I can fill the bill as good as any man——"

"Any more Chillagoe Charlies?" inquired the superintendent, and the troopers grinned as they remembered that nearly all the present self-accusers had already been suspected by their leader.

"Not just now," Mr. Hornsby answered. "Tell your men to gather round and help themselves. I

expect you'll be rushed with Chillagoe Charlies presently, for I see Dave is explaining matters to those of our boys who do not as yet know the story. I don't suppose you would be content now to hold me as the gentleman who is in such popular demand?"

"No, Mr. Hornsby," the officer replied with a rather sickly smile; "you have cheated me twice already, but I'll take care you won't do it a third time. I would like to know, however, why you deliberately led me to believe you were the gentleman who seems to be so much in evidence to-night?"

"Then you are quite convinced now that I am not?" Mr. Hornsby seemed amused.

"Quite; but you haven't told me why you took such an interest in the man-hunting game."

"I didn't, until you began to prove I was Chillagoe Charlie. At first I took you for a good-natured but foolish sort of fellow who had earned a reputation by sheer luck, or perhaps influence. When you began to show your proofs I changed my mind, and although I laughed at you, still I knew that you would ultimately find your man——"

"But why couldn't you have told me who he was? It would have saved you much inconvenience, and as a J.P. it was almost your duty to have done so."

"Pardon me. At the time I didn't know who he was."

"Then you know now?"

"I knew the first night I met you; you practically told me who he was. The proofs which you so skilfully deduced against me fitted another person exactly; that person was my friend. Need I say more? I at once tried to detract suspicion from him by drawing it upon myself——"

"I suppose I need not ask now who that person is?"

"No; he will tell you himself when he is ready. But you are not eating anything. We'll continue our conversation when you have dined."

"Just one question first. Have I ever had the honour of meeting the genuine Chillagoe Charlie?"

"Yes; so far as my memory goes, I believe you have met him."

"Thank you. My men and the boys of this camp seem to be getting on well together."

"Oh, yes; unlike yours and mine, their worries cease with the finish of their day's work. Still, Dave is talking too much. I expect he is priming the boys with some new idea. Sam and Mike, too, are up to some game, but you needn't be alarmed, we're all white men here."

"I am not in the slightest. I've got a card up my sleeve myself."

Mr. Hornsby laughed, and walked over among the men, and the superintendent began to eat as if he had not tasted food that day. Nor had he; he had led his men without a halt, except to give their jaded horses a drink, since daylight. But now they were enjoying a meal among white prospectors, such as had not come their way since they had shared Caledonia Camp's hospitality, and they were grateful. Laughing and chatting gaily with the happy-go-lucky prospectors, they spent an hour at the long table, and finally pipes were produced and all rose to move outside. Sailor Bill then told the story which led up to the strange fight the troopers had unconsciously finished, and Dirty Sam related how Tom had discovered the great value of the ore which had hitherto been looked upon as useless after its gold had been extracted.

"Oh, I forgot about that," the superintendent said to Mr. Hornsby, when Tom's name was mentioned.

"I presume this Tom is the young fellow I met with you down in Caledonia Camp? Is he here just now?"

"Why, don't you know me, superintendent?" spoke Tom beside him; "I have been here all the evening."

"What!" exclaimed the officer in surprise. "You are not the boy whose father I knew in the old country? You are as big as any of my men and your face is different entirely."

"Still, I am the person you met in Caledonia Camp, and you are the last man I saw in that camp. I——"

"Tom has grown into a man during his adventurous ride north," said Dirty Sam. "He couldn't long remain a boy with Chillagoe Charlie, the parson, Mike, Dave, and me for companions, not to mention his own adventures with the aborigines and Chinese."

"No, I suppose one of the lad's age quickly shapes his character from his environment. But I was going to say, Tom, that I have been making inquiries about your uncle, and I find that he was last seen somewhere up here. He was one of the best known pioneers of the north, and is thought to have associated himself with the Chinese, whom he understood very well. I am going to institute a special search for him while up here, and if he is alive my boys will find him."

"I think the parson is on his tracks now," said Mr. Hornsby, "and Chillagoe Charlie is also hunting round for him."

"It is strange how that character crops up in everything," laughed the officer. "What do you know of Charlie, Tom?"

"Only that he is a gentleman whom I would fight for if he required my help; I don't know who he is,

but after Mr. Hornsby and the parson, and, of course, Mike, Sam, and Dave, he is my best friend."

"Good old Chillagoe Charlie!" the men shouted; "we'll all fight for him."

"I hope you'll give us time to get out of the way first," the superintendent said good-naturedly. "I am most desirous—apart from business—to meet that person myself. I believe I have something to say which will materially affect him——"

"Hullo, boys," cried one of the men, "that little black dog with the long ears hears something coming. Maybe it is the Chinese."

Mr. Hornsby arose hurriedly. "No," he said; "it is likely the parson coming back from his walk."

But it was not; it was a band of riders, and a few minutes later their horses' hoofs rang out on the hard ground near the camp, and next moment a voice called out, "Hullo! mates; is this a white man's camp?"

"On the banks o' runnin' water!" shouted Dave, as usual misquoting his song title. "That's Hungry Ted's foghorn, an' I'll bet a kick at that fat trooper that the rest of the boys are with him."

A howl of delight went up from the riders as they heard Dave's well-known voice, and sliding from their saddles they rushed into camp. All the old boys were there, and also Long Tom and another man from Crocodile Crossing. It was some time before the commotion attending their arrival abated sufficiently to allow any one voice to be heard, but at last Mr. Hornsby managed to secure comparative silence and he said, "What is the meaning of you boys coming up here? The mines will be ruined, left entirely to strangers and a new chum manager."

"Can't help it, boss," replied Peter the Poet. "We

don't feel that we are responsible for the mines since you left, and we have all come up here because we heard that the troopers were chasing Chillagoe Charlie north this way, and——"

"Don't you see the troopers around you now?" cried Dirty Sam warningly.

"Centipedes an' flying ants!" ejaculated Ginger Bob, "so they are. See here, Mr. boss trooper, we have been hunting after ye these last couple o' hundred miles on a matter o' important business."

"Shut up, Ginger, an' let Peter the Poet or Long Tom talk," said Tommy the Kangaroo.

"We have come after you, Mr. Policeman," began Long Tom, "in the interests of justice. We heard that Mr. Hornsby had been arrested because it was thought he was Chillagoe Charlie, and we have followed you to tell you that Chillagoe Charlie is a name we have all used—that, in fact, we are all Chillagoe Charlies."

A moment's absolute silence marked the surprise of all, then a wild shout of joy burst from the throats of the other men.

"That's the ticket" was, in effect, their general cry. "We are all Chillagoe Charlies."

Mr. Hornsby looked very much astonished, as did also the troopers.

"This is getting most interesting," the superintendent finally remarked. "I can't very well arrest you all——"

"And you can't take one without taking us all," put in Long Tom significantly. "We're all ready to take our share of whatever the Government has in store for us, but we'll fight like dingoes against one being made a scapegoat."

"You men have most vivid imaginations," the

superintendent said in reply. "What proof have you to offer to substantiate your statement?"

"Well," laughed Long Tom, "I remember when you thought yourself you had proved that I was Chillagoe Charlie. I don't know that we care to give proof of anything. It is you who have to do that. No one has ever seen Chillagoe Charlie through the day, and I am telling you now that all we fellows have at various times made use of that name. For myself I don't believe that there ever really existed a person bearing the title of Chillagoe Charlie. It was a joint concern."

"Gentlemen, you make me smile. You are all fine fellows and I am proud to know you. A week ago I was turning the country upside down to lay my hands on the clever Charlie. I got plenty of clues and I believe I made it inconvenient for most of you fellows in turn. Of course I was only the silly old trooper boss, and fair game for you all, but you really overdo the thing now by forcing yourselves upon me. Then, I couldn't get into contact with Charlie no matter what I did or how many miles my good fellows rode; now I can't get away from Charlies even although we thought we were riding away from his haunts altogether when we started up this way."

— "What do you mean?" cried Mr. Hornsby. "Did you not come up here over my tracks?"

"We did; and we rode hard to catch you up, but not to take you prisoner. You see, I found out by methods of my own that the person known as Chillagoe Charlie was a Chinaman——"

"God save the King! Hallelujah! and we won't go home till sundown! I knew he would come round to that," roared Dave. "If there is any chance of being able to do the wrong thing, be sure the troopers will

do it. Here we have given enough Chillagoe Charlies to make an army, an' now the boss trooper wants to make out that the fellow who can be in two places at once, an' who can scare the life outen most people, is a last rose of summer Chinkie." Dave's disgust was great, and some of the men lay flat on the ground and roared with laughter.

Tom was silent. He knew Mr. Hornsby had some surprise ready to spring upon every one, and he wondered what had become of the parson. It was no business of his to say anything which might help the troopers to discover the identity of the man for whom he had shot the revolver out of the superintendent's hand.

"Don't be foolish again, superintendent," said Mr. Hornsby. "That last shot of yours must be very wide of the mark."

"Not so wide as you think, sir," responded the officer.

"By Jupiter! Mr. Trooper Boss, I believe there is something in what you say," spoke Dick Ford earnestly. He winked at Mr. Hornsby as he spoke. "That blamed fellow who has caused such a lot of trouble everywhere must be a Chinaman. I know for a fact he was in their camp last night, for he came here and told us something which set us moving quick an' lively——"

"Chillagoe Charlie here!" cried the troopers in chorus.

"Of course," replied Dick. "He's always been here. You go over to the Chinese with your men; we'll go too, for we want to find that hidden city of theirs, and I'll go nap you'll get the one and only genuine Chillagoe Charlie."

Dick continued in this strain for some time, much



" 'CHILLAGOE CHARLIE IS HERE. WHAT HAVE YOU AGAINST HIM?' "

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to his comrades' amazement, for they could not understand why Dick should wish to give Chillagoe Charlie away, seeing he had done so much for them. But when he finished addressing the cool, smiling superintendent he soon explained.

"They'll go and kick up blazes among the yellow-skins," he explained in low tones, "and, boys, I may tell you some of us know who Charlie is. He is a friend of ours, and may be saved if we can get the troopers to believe he is a Chinaman."

"What do you think of the idea?" Mr. Hornsby asked with a laugh. "I confess Dick has put a new aspect on affairs."

"Please don't be cynical, Mr. Hornsby," interposed the officer; "you know who he is, and why should you pretend that you think he might be a Chinaman?"

"You said so yourself——?"

"Yes, but I had something to add which would have considerably altered the significance of my words. But you tell me Charlie is here. In that case if you are his friend, as you say, bring him to me at once. I have something to say of special interest to Chillagoe Charlie, and I want to see the real one—not any of the sham ones—very much——"

"Chillagoe Charlie is here. What have you against him?" came a voice from the darkness, and before any one could reply that individual stepped into the light. He was dressed as he always was, in top boots, belted trousers, and blue soft shirt, while a mask concealed his face. Revolvers and knives bristled in his belt, while a broad-brimmed, soft felt hat, turned rakishly up on the left side, graced his head.

An electrical thrill ran through all the men, and for a space a silence deep and unbroken reigned in the camp. Mr. Hornsby was the first to break it. "Come

in," he said. "There are some Government people here very eager to meet you."

"It is a pleasure that has long been denied us," added the superintendent; "I hope you are well." He signed to his men to resume their seats, and Mr. Hornsby also signalled to the miners that they were not to fall upon the troopers just yet.

Tom came over and grasped the masked man's hand. "Why have you come here?" he asked. "These troopers must do their duty, and of course we'll fight them before we'll allow them to touch you."

"Hear the kid," cried Sailor Bill. "One would think he was skipper of a Bolivian gun-boat——"

"I have come to hear what crimes I have committed against the laws of Queensland, Tom, and also to save my friends from perjuring themselves on my behalf."

"By the man who broke the bank at that place with the double name!" cried Dave. "We don't mind lying like an M.P. for ye, if it will do any good. Do we, boys?"

"We'll lie like ten of them, and a Sydney lawyer thrown in," answered Carbonate Chris. "It costs us nothing anyhow."

"We'll fight for you, as the boy said," cried Long Tom. "We're not afraid of bullet holes."

"I back Long Tom's sentiments," said Peter the Poet aggressively. "The troopers are no good, and it is about time they got a hiding."

"Hear, hear," chorused the men, making a general movement as if to carry out their idea of fighting the troopers at once.

"Sit down, men," ordered Mr. Hornsby, and the masked man also signified his wish that there should be no trouble. Sam, Mike, and Dick had remained silent. They knew more than the others.

"At least wait until we see that you have got the right man to fight for," the superintendent advised. "This looks like the real thing, but I have met so many to-night that I have my doubts. You say you are Chillagoe Charlie?"

"I am the person known in *these parts* by that name."

"I note you lay the emphasis on the words 'these parts,' does that imply that some one else uses the name in other parts?"

"It does; but you are a fully appointed officer of the law, and with Mr. Hornsby, and a jury of your own men, can constitute yourselves into a court to try me——"

"No, thanks, Mr. Chillagoe; it is past business hours. Come back to-morrow."

"Good old trooper boss!" shouted Hungry Ted. "He means you to clear out, Charlie, and forget to leave your address."

"Thanks, Mr. Superintendent, for the kindness which prompted your hint, but I am not a prisoner pleading for mercy, nor do I know of any reason why I should desire to escape."

"You don't? Well, to tell the straight truth, I think I only know of one serious charge of which I have not already proved you innocent; but since other business will take up my time to-morrow, we may as well put you through an examination. Gentlemen, by virtue of my position, of the fact that a J.P. of the State of Queensland is present, and of the extraordinary nature of the case in hand, I propose to constitute this camp into a court of justice. Mr. Hornsby, will you kindly call together a jury?"

"Snakes, boys, but this is great fun!" cried Tommy the Kangaroo. "We'll hang the boss trooper, and

sentence all his men to work in the lower levels of our mines for life."

A grin stole over the superintendent's features, but he ignored Tommy's words. "You can have any one you wish to advise you as to how you should answer, Mr. Chillagoe Charlie!" he said; "I can recommend my sergeant here; he is well versed in the law."

"Thanks, but I can answer for myself," responded the man in the mask.

"I think you had better look upon this as an informal affair," suggested Mr. Hornsby, after speaking a few words in an undertone to Chillagoe Charlie. "Let it be merely a court of inquiry. Possibly a few words of explanation may turn the whole case for the Crown—if there ever really were any case—into such a burlesque that it would be better for all concerned if you looked a little into the matter first, privately. I will undertake that my friend Chillagoe Charlie will afterwards accompany you to Brisbane if you so desire."

"Strange to say, Mr. Hornsby, I don't think I shall require that. I have full special duty powers, and I have already used them to some extent, especially since I was regretfully compelled to put you to the little inconvenience from which you so cleverly escaped——"

"Come on with the funeral, boss," interrupted Long Tom; "I am dying to see Charlie take off that mask; I'll bet my claim at Crocodile Crossing I know his chin."

The figure standing so still and silent by Tom's side instinctively placed his hand to his chin, and noticing the action Tom started violently. He felt sure he had seen that hand only recently.

"Oh, I'll finish my work quickly enough," the superintendent said; "and I hope our friend will come

off with flying colours. Now, sir, did you or did you not break into the bank at Gamboola, and after a murderous attack on the manager who heard you make off with a large sum of money?"

"I did not; I have never been in Gamboola in my life."

"Did you garrote a half-drunken miner in Murgoona and rob him of his month's wages on the 28th of last month?"

"Certainly not; I have only been three times in Murgoona: the first time was when I met you, and another was when I had to establish evidence as to certain times——"

"Did you break into Higgins's store on the 14th preceding?"

"No. Never heard of Higgins's store."

"Did you steal three horses from White Downs station on Sunday, the 11th?"

"No; on Sunday, the 11th, I was in Caledonia Camp——" The speaker stopped. He knew he had given himself away, and Dave was quick to see it.

"Well, I'll be—be—is jiggered swearing, boys?—'cos if it isn't I know who was in our camp that day——"

"Shut up, you blundering idiot!" roared Peter the Poet, also remembering.

"It was a tailor's traveller from Brisbane wantin' orders," continued Dave innocently, "and the parson gave him an order for a couple of new rig outs."

"The parson?" mused the officer. "I've heard a lot about the wonderful travelling parson who goes about all the far-back camps, and can fight, ride, or play with the best of the boys. He must know something about you, Mr. Chillagoe Charlie? If you could only get him to say a good word for you——"

He won't," snapped the masked one. "He will say nothing for Chillagoe Charlie."

"Yes, he will," cried Tom. "He told me himself that you had no better friend than he."

"I have known the parson ever since he became one, Tom, and I know that he will allow Chillagoe Charlie to stand or fall without saying a word in his favour."

"Tom, come over here beside me," cried Mr. Hornsby; "there's just a chance that you might spoil this show unintentionally if you are not kept in check."

"Oh no, the lad won't spoil anything," the superintendent said; "in fact, I may tell you all that I know already that most of the deeds supposed to have been committed by the person known as Chillagoe Charlie were the work of a syndicate of saloon keepers around Chillagoe and Murgooona. I know them all and will yard them up at the proper moment. As I have said, there is only one charge remaining against this person, although I must say he himself is largely responsible for all his troubles by his foolishly riding all over the country in his present guise."

"Would it surprise you very much, superintendent, if I told you that I have only appeared in character about four times anywhere south of the Palmer River water-shed, and each time I had a good reason?"

"Oh, I think I could survive the shock. The Palmer is the haunt of hordes of Chinese, I know, and from information I have collected from various quarters this last week, it appears that Chillagoe Charlie is—or shall I say was?—a Chinaman."

"But this man is not a Chinaman," Mr. Hornsby interrupted.

"I don't know, officially. He wears a mask. There is no crime in doing so; but as all the trouble seems to

hang on that fact, it is probable that if he explained his reasons for hiding his face from his fellow-men everything else might be explained at the same time."

"Boys, I am beginning to think the trooper boss isn't such a mighty fool as we thought," spoke Ginger Bob; "I'll bet a pigtail I've got the hang of what he is driving at already——"

"Dry up, Ginger!" ordered Hungry Ted; "Chillagoe Charlie is going to speak."

"The reason why I at times wear a mask is this," began the central figure in the group of interested men. "Over a year ago, while riding through the bush to visit a mining camp, I came up with a man, a Chinaman, dying from sheer lack of desire to keep alive. Eventually he passed away in my arms, but before he did so he told me a strange story. He had been the leader of a sect of better-class Chinese who lived in the mysterious secret city on the Palmer River, but in a fight with some white prospectors his pigtail had been cut off. As you know, the loss of the pigtail, to the Chinese mind, means eternal disgrace, and he was banished from his fellows with the order *never to show his face again*.

"He went away; but as he was the only man among the Chinese with any knowledge of mineralogy, they were forced to recall him. But when once an edict has gone forth among sons of the Celestial Empire, it stands for all time and may not be repealed, therefore they made the provision that he must *hide his face under a mask*. He went back for a time, but the disgrace preyed upon his mind, and although he was treated well on account of his knowledge, he could not suffer his position, and one day left the city to wander over the face of Northern Australia until death released him. I found him, as I have said, when the end was near, and stayed with him to the last. Dur-

ing his last moments he told me that he had discovered a wonderful cavern adjoining the caves in which the city existed, and which was as yet unknown to any one. Its walls were rich in a formation carrying gold, and water was available in the cavern itself, for washing it out. He directed me how to find the place and also told me the position of the city. Some time after, wearing his mask, I visited this city and was hailed with joy, for the people had thought that their only mineralogist had gone for ever. I understand the Chinese language fairly well, and managed to act my part so that they did not suspect I was not their disgraced comrade. I soon found out that my name was Ching Ching Charlie, which white prospectors, who had seen the masked Chinaman, turned into Chillagoe Charlie, doubtless because most of them had come north past that township. Seeing my chance now to help my own comrades, I told them of the wonderful formation in the cavern adjoining the Chinese secret city, and we decided we should risk working the place disguised as Chinese. This we have done ever since, accounting for any little eccentricities by giving out that we were members of a secret sect—secret societies, as you probably are aware, exercise a powerful fascination over the Celestial mind—known by a name which, being translated, means Brothers of the Closed Fist——”

“Well, I’m——” began Dirty Sam, but Dave finished his words reprovngly with “A little pilgrim and a stranger here.” And Sam said no more.

“Mr. Hornsby and I had already founded this camp here though, and I could not risk taking its members into our confidence, they having suffered so much at various times by the doings of the Chinese, that they would not have been contented until they had wiped

out the population of the hidden city. I had thus two characters to keep up—my own and that of Ching Ching, or Chillagoe Charlie. As myself I mixed with the prospectors and miners everywhere, and took great care that they never suspected I was the mysterious Chinaman who flew about at midnight visiting the aborigines and outlying Chinese settlements. When Mr. Hornsby took up the Caledonia Mines I extended my peregrinations further south than usual to visit him and his men, all of whom I knew intimately, and it was while down there last that I heard of the evil name of Chillagoe Charlie. I could not help playing tricks upon the police then, but I did no harm, and I believe you will admit that after having listened to your boastings of how you would deal with Chillagoe Charlie, I treated you very decently when I tricked you. The rest is soon told. I mutilated the reward notices posted up about me wherever I found them, for some of the words were very objectionable, and one day I met this boy and then a new interest came into my life. He was looking for his uncle, and I resolved to bring that person back from the dead past in which I knew him. That is all, gentlemen. I appeared at Crocodile Crossing to scare away the claim speculators, in the interests of the honest miners, and I was at the springs the same night to pay cash for the trooper sergeant's horse I had borrowed. Mike rode it away for me, partly because he half suspected who I was, and partly because it seemed to him an excellent joke. The next night, I think it was, I again visited the camp, and that time you would have caught me had not Tom shot the revolver out of your hand——”

“What!” cried the superintendent. “Was it Tom who fired that shot?”

"It was," Tom said; "but at the time Chillagoe Charlie and I were comrades, and it was my duty to save him if I could——"

"Oh, I am not blaming you for that, it was the shot I was thinking of."

"Tom is a first-class shot," put in Mr. Hornsby. "He and the parson both amazed me with their powers with the rifle."

"Well, to finish," continued the narrator, "I came north to make arrangements for clearing my name, to give the secret of the rich cave deposit to my younger comrades, and then to live as myself, openly."

"Then who are you?" asked the officer, and all held their breath for the reply.

For answer the man bent down, and pulling his trousers from the inside of his top-boots, he allowed the legs to drop outside, thus hiding the tell-tale boots. "My coat is strapped to my saddle," he said, turning his hat into a less aggressive shape; "but you may imagine it buttoned over my belt." He raised his hands to his face, and when he took them away the mask went with them and he stood revealed.

"The parson!" shouted every one in incomprehending amazement.

"Snakes, boys, am I dreamin'?" asked Long Tom, rubbing his eyes.

"Keel haul me, but my port lights have got mixed up with the starboard," Sailor Bill commented, and while Dave recited a whole verse of a poem concerning a young lady who owned a fleecy quadruped, and the persistence with which the said quadruped followed her to school and elsewhere, the rest of the men crowded round the parson with howls of delight.

"Kick me for an idiot or a trooper," roared Hungry

Ted. "How did I not know that only the parson could have done the things Chillagoe Charlie did?"

"Drop me down a shaft, somebody," Peter the Poet implored. "I am no longer of any use when I couldn't spot the parson."

"An' God save the King! To think that I once fought with Chillagoe Charlie!" cried Dave.

It was a long time before the excitement died down, but when it had in part subsided the superintendent walked up to the parson and shook his hand. "I am proud to know you," he said. "I suspected you nearly from the first, and that is why I worked so hard to clear you of these common cut-throat charges."

"I thank you," the parson answered. "I never expected to find friends among the troopers."

"Puncture me with lead bullets, parson," roared Long Tom, "you have friends everywhere."

"Good old parson!" cried Carbonate Chris.

"Good old Chillagoe Charlie!" added Ginger Bob, and again the camp resounded with shouts that could easily have rivalled that of the combined Chinese and aborigines earlier in the evening.

"But," said Tom, as Mr. Hornsby, the parson, Mike, Sam, and he endeavoured to talk together amidst the uproar, "I saw you as Chillagoe Charlie among the men in the cave. I ran all the way back to camp and the parson was sleeping there——?"

"Yes, Tom, I saw you in the cave; that is why I wore the mask there, for I don't usually wear it when among my proved friends. When you left I merely climbed the ladder which reaches to the top of the first ledge and which you did not see, and so got home before you."

"But your voice?" said Mr. Hornsby. "That is what cheated me all along until you told me to-night

when the boys were out seeing the fight. How did you manage to disguise it so well?"

"By means of this mask. It is made of copper, as you see, and refracts the sound of the voice so much that it is completely unrecognisable."

"But how did you manage to be at Murgoona and Caledonia Camp at the same time?" asked Tom, still hardly able to believe that his two great friends were one and the same.

"I wasn't, Tom. I have several very fast horses, as you know, trained to come to me at my whistle, but even flying machines could not annihilate time. I merely made use of the fact that Murgoona, being a railway terminus, uses standard time the same as Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne, while Caledonia Camp was run by correct or sun time, which was some thirty minutes later. That half-hour and my best horse enabled me to do the seemingly impossible——"

"There's just one thing I would like to know before asking you to explain away the only charge remaining against you," broke in the superintendent, joining the group. "Do you know of any reason why Messrs. Smith, O'Brian and company should have done so much against you?"

"I do. They were members of the party whom Chillagoe Charlie led to the cavern, but he had to dispense with them before doing so, as it was well known that they were only card-sharpers and lived by cheating their comrades out of their hard-earned profits."

"Why did you not tell us sooner, parson?" said Dirty Sam. "We could have trumped up a charge against them and got them put where they couldn't trouble."

"You forget, Sam, that I am a parson. At one time

I might have fallen in with your suggestion, but I do my best to live a straight life now and be of some good to my fellow-men."

"Well, gentlemen," cried the superintendent, rapping upon the table so as to draw the attention of every one, "roll up for the last scene in the last act——"

"I'll bet you my horse it isn't anywhere near the last act," broke in Mike. "The real play will only commence when the parson is free to do as he likes."

"Right, Mike!" cried Mr. Hornsby. "We've got the hidden city to see and the great gold formations, and Tom has to find his uncle."

"Just explain away the only real charge remaining against you, sir, and I'll put myself and men at your service for any purpose you like. You are supposed to be responsible for the disappearance of a number of men. I couldn't clear you of that, no matter what I did, for the evidence was too strong. Give me your word that you know nothing about them and I'll not push the matter further——"

"But I do know about them. I *am* responsible for their disappearance. Come in, boys."

"Great centipedes! what is coming next?" asked Peter the Poet. "I believe the parson has got the very men waiting out there in the darkness."

And it seemed as if Peter were right, for as he finished speaking a dozen men filed into the light and stood still and expressionless.

A dumfounded silence fell over all.

"Chinese!" gasped the troopers and miners together a moment later.

"Not by ten miles and a quarter," one of the newcomers answered in response to a sign from the parson. "Only members of the Closed Fist gang and Austra-

lians to the buttons on our shirts." With a deft movement each man removed his pigtail, next he caused his blue silk overall to drop, and in a second twelve typical prospectors stood revealed.

"There are the missing men," said the parson quietly. "They can answer to their own names."

But there was little need for further inquiry; the men were instantly recognised by nearly all the others, and again the uproar in camp made the parrots in the trees wonder if a cyclone were coming.

"Boys," shouted the superintendent above the din, "just give me one moment, please."

"Hurry up, then," cried Dirty Sam. "You have nothing against Chillagoe Charlie now, so your journey up here has been wasted."

"Not by any means, my dear sir. Now that our mutual friend has cleared himself of everything said against him, allow me to say that we troopers did not come up here after him at all. We came north because a native named the Bishop brought me word that a plot had been hatched to exterminate the white men. We rode north night and day to put in a word in that game, and here we intend to stay until you fellows have got all the gold you want or we are recalled. I may add, too, on behalf of my own brave boys and myself, that it will give us great pleasure to be of service to men who were ready to sacrifice themselves to save a comrade. But I must say that I was not such a fool as I may have appeared to you. After my first talk with Mr. Hornsby I saw there were more Chillagoe Charlies than one, and I pretended to be finding them among you fellows so as to disarm the suspicions of the gentry now under lock and key. Mr. Chillagoe Charlie, I would like to shake hands with you again and to compliment you as the parson

on having so many friends who cared not what risks they ran for you."

"I am thankful, sir, that I have such friends; it shows that my work has not entirely been without result, although I did not mean that they should be drawn more to the man than to his humble teaching."

"Three cheers for the parson!" roared Hungry Ted.

"And three for Chillagoe Charlie!" Long Tom shouted.

"Another three for Mr. Hornsby!" cried Dirty Sam.

"And the same for the boss trooper!" added Sailor Bill.

"An' what about the boy who has found out that we've got a gold mine of silver around us?" demanded Dave.

"Three for Tom also!" cried Mike, and by the time the cheers for all had been given the morning stars were beginning to appear in the heavens.

"We'll go and work the cave formations first," said the parson, "and we'll hold so many shares for the troopers for enabling us to work openly and safely——"

"And afterwards will you help me to find my uncle?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Ah, Tom, I had forgotten that. Have you not guessed? I could not tell you while a stain rested on my name. I am your uncle."

"God save the King!" cried Dave, and Tom flung himself into the parson's arms.

"And three cheers for him!" interrupted the superintendent before Dave got further.

And for once Dave's preparatory remarks were taken literally by all, even Nigger and the other dogs adding their voices.

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